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Information Commons: The Future is Now

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Abstract: First established in the United States in the 1990's, the information commons (IC) has become a common way to provide users of academic libraries with a variety of both library and technology services in the 21st century. Now a worldwide phenomenon, the information commons offers, in a centralized location, research and writing assistance, access to computers and other technology, high-speed Internet and wireless communication, loans of laptops and tablet devices, tutoring, both quiet and noisy work study areas, collaborative spaces, classrooms, digital media services, coffee and food items, and more. From the smallest to the largest institutions, the IC has become almost a necessity if the academic library is to be successful in attracting and serving users, primarily undergraduates. Focused heavily on the use of technology and sometimes known as the learning commons, the IC seeks to both meet user needs and to more fully integrate the library into the academic programs of the university. The effective implementation of an information commons adds value to traditional services and embraces the idea that innovation and knowledge creation are at the center of a modern academic library. This paper describes the features and goals of this innovative service model and presents a description of the very successful implementation of the Information Commons at Loyola University Chicago.

Keywords: information commons, academic libraries, Loyola University Chicago

I. Introduction

Seven years ago I presented a paper (Seal 2005) at the Third China-U.S. Library Conference in Shanghai in which I stated that the concept of an information commons (IC) had become a mainstream approach for providing a new model of service in academic libraries in the early part of the 21st century. Today, in 2012, the IC model is now even more widely implemented, indeed a global phenomenon, one that has resulted in dramatically increased attendance in our university libraries despite the fact that so much information is accessible via the World Wide Web, leading some to predict the demise of the physical library. That, I am happy to say, is not the case—far from it. The first half of this paper reviews the information commons concept, describes its features and advantages, and makes a case for the adoption of this service in one form or another in any academic library. This is followed by a description of the successful implementation in 2008 of the Information Commons at Loyola University in Chicago, the author's home institution.

II. The academic library commons

First conceived and implemented in the United States two decades ago, the information commons is a model of service aimed at meeting the constantly changing needs of academic library users, primarily, but not exclusively, undergraduate students. Wherever it has been established, on-site use of the university library has increased dramatically, almost from one day

to the next. In fact, the resurgence in the popularity of academic libraries in general in the past decade, especially among the so-called Millennials, is a direct result of the appearance of information commons in its variety of forms.

But what exactly is an information commons? First of all, it goes by a number of aliases depending upon the library or form of the service: learning commons, academic commons, computer commons, technology commons, or some other nomenclature. For purposes of this paper, the term "information commons" will be used in most cases. One of the earliest descriptions of the concept was given by Donald Beagle (1999, p.82) when he offered two discrete models: first, "an exclusively online environment in which the widest possible variety of digital services are available through a single graphical user interface…. content includes both library collections and other digital materials available on an enhanced, integrated web site with sophisticated searching, help, and results." Second, "a new type of physical facility or area specifically designed to organize workspace and service delivery around the integrated digital environment…." "It incorporates the first model (virtual) and adds staffing and new services while creating a new information environment."

In the 13 years since Beagle's now classic article, the World Wide Web has grown exponentially, computer technology has advanced dramatically, social networking has appeared and permeated much of what our students (and we) do, and our understanding of how the IC can aid library service and learning has advanced significantly. A more current definition would be a place where library, technology, and teaching services merge, along with professionals from those areas to enhance research, create knowledge, and facilitate learning. As Beagle (2010, p.10) put it recently: "The IC potentially offers a "continuum of service" that can help the student move through and beyond the established regime of information access and retrieval, through further steps of interpretation, processing, and manipulation, and on to the development, packaging and presentation of new knowledge."

Martin Halbert (2010, p.73) describes the information commons as "a platform for innovation…fundamentally as the shape of libraries to come." He goes on to assert that "the strength of the information commons to date has not only stemmed from responsive innovations in libraries but also and significantly because it has successfully served as a cultural and conceptual bridge for libraries from the past to the future" (ibid.). I contend that indeed the IC is the future of libraries and we have arrived at that future, indeed are shaping the future of all academic libraries via the commons model.

III. The Information Commons: characteristics, services, and philosophy

On a practical level, what does the typical information commons look like? What services does it incorporate? What type of staffing is involved? What are its salient features? While the physical commons can be an entirely free-standing building, separate from or connected to the main library or some other academic structure, more commonly it is a section or one or more floors of a library. Often, it is strategically placed on the main floor for easy access

by users and, whether intentional or not, it says to the visitor that "we are a modern, 21st century library."

The primary focus of an information commons is technology: tools to complete class assignments, conduct research, acquire information, and synthesize and create knowledge. Computers, scanners, printers, digital and video cameras, teleconferencing equipment, e-book readers, and much more are all at the center of the IC philosophy. A secondary but equally important emphasis is space for collaborative work: group study rooms, large tables, classrooms, and groupings of comfortable seating. Today's generation of students more often than not want to work in pairs or groups, whether as part of a class assignment, studying for an exam, or just doing homework. This tendency is facilitated by the collaborative spaces typical of the information commons.

Students also come to the IC to socialize. Not only have traditional restrictions on food and drink been virtually eliminated in most U.S. academic libraries, but now many have a café. The overall atmosphere is more relaxed than the sterile, sedate library of the past, conversation is permitted, even encouraged, and there is a decided emphasis is on comfortable furniture, leading Lippincott (2010, p.32) to observe that "the Information Commons can also support the social aspects of learning." She notes that "increasingly, educators highlight the importance of interaction between people as a key aspect of learning, whether the interaction is student peer-to-peer, interaction between students and faculty, or interaction between students and members of the community or a professional group" (ibid., p.32-33).

But the information commons is not just a computer lab, study hall, or lounge as the previous paragraphs might lead one to believe. That is because the IC's technology and spaces are complemented by online information resources, creativity and collaborative software, and a wide array of services supporting learning and research. Users are guided by librarians who provide the expert assistance needed to navigate and use databases, library catalogs, and the Web as well as technology specialists to help solve computer and access issues and advise on the use of hardware and software.

Depending on the institution, services run the gamut from basic reference and computer help to laptop circulation, tutoring, digital media production, technology workshops, academic seminars, library instruction, presentation practice rooms, audio and video studios, even cultural programming. It's no wonder that the information commons is a popular place for students and many faculty. "The variety of innovations in technology, media, and services found in Information Common…is extraordinary, as is the range of improved benefits that they offer to their clienteles" (Halbert, p.67, ibid.). These benefits include seamless and ready access to information resources, software, and hardware needed to create knowledge; flexible spaces both formal and informal which adapt to students' differing learning styles; and the opportunity to interact with both fellow classmates, professors, and librarians, all of whom contribute significantly to their education.

A major reason that the information commons model has had so much success is that it represents a significant change in attitude by librarians who for decades based services and facilities on what they believed best for users. This was well articulated by Lippincott (ibid., p.29) who, in describing the planning of an information commons, wrote "it is important to collect information on the actual needs of students and not just on needs perceived by librarians, *who are frequently from a different generation*" [emphasis added].   She further stressed that we must "consider the needs of all students, including returning students (older adults) and other groups with particular needs, such as commuter students, foreign students, or students with disabilities in the information commons planning process" (ibid., p.29-30).

The IC is a new type of library, one which is transforming both pedagogy and learning. Beagle (2010, p.8) notes that the result of the combination of technology and services into a new model becomes "something that seems greater than [its] constituent parts." He quotes a professor from the University of Pennsylvania who stated that she is "astonished to see how the space and its services are transforming my teaching and my students" (ibid., p.8).   In short, the information commons can invigorate, enhance, and facilitate learning, not only because of the technology, space, services, and expert help, but because the current generation of students are comfortable with and thrive in the new library environment.

The information commons is also consistent with today's college student who seeks convenient, rapid access to information, and desires to work independently. The Millennials are not only constantly connected to the world around them via cell phones and instant messaging, but they prefer to do their own research without the help of a librarian. They expect instantaneous response when they click on a search term, an expectation mostly fulfilled by Google, Bing, and other search engines. They use cell phones instead of a watch to get the time, pay for nearly everything with a credit card, find restaurants using a smart phone, and think email is passé. They live in a technology space and the IC is a microcosm of that world.

While the information commons is a highly successful service model, we cannot be satisfied with the status quo. Libraries must continue to develop and evolve the IC as users' needs and expectations change. This means incorporating social networking into services and their promotion. It means learning more about students' study and research habits. It means partnering with faculty to realize the full potential of the IC in supporting, even transforming, means of pedagogy and ultimately learning and knowledge creation. It means continuing to listen to users. It means keeping up with changes in technology, communication, and social media trends. It means seeking and establishing strong relationships with campus departments such as information and instructional technology, writing centers, tutoring, faculty development, media services, and more, in order to provide comprehensive support for teaching, learning, and research in this now established information commons environment.

IV. The Information Commons of Loyola University Chicago

A. Introduction. The information commons at Loyola University Chicago opened in January 2008. In the nearly five years of its operation, it has been an unqualified success in terms of attendance, user satisfaction, and programming. The purpose of this portion of the paper is to present a real life example of an effective information commons, its philosophy, characteristics, and operation. Keys to success and lessons learned in its first half decade will also be described.

B. Institutional overview. Loyola University Chicago is a doctoral granting university offering a variety of degree programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. In 2012 it had nearly 16,000 students, of which more than 9,000 are undergraduates. The University has five libraries in Chicago including law and medicine as well as a library/IC at the school's campus in Rome, Italy. One of these facilities is the information commons, a separate building connected to the main library by a corridor with a café. The Loyola IC was constructed at a cost of $32 million and has 72,000 square feet distributed over four floors. Described by some as a "library of the future," it has only a handful of reference books and is focused primarily on computer technology to access information.

C. Library-IT partnership. The Loyola IC is a cooperative project of the University Libraries and Information Technology Services (ITS), the campus IT group. The Libraries provide information resources, research assistance, and bibliographic instruction, while ITS provides the computer hardware and software, technology training, customer support, and the network and wireless infrastructure. The IC's operation from the beginning has been a true partnership from planning through implementation to operations today.

D. Objectives and features. The information commons at Loyola University Chicago has three primary objectives:
- Focus on undergraduate library and technology needs
- Create a one-stop information shopping experience
- Provide tools for the creation of knowledge.

Designed for the future with an open, flexible layout, the Loyola IC includes a video conference room, a digital media lab, a satellite of the University's writing center, equipment checkout, a large, multipurpose meeting space, and group study rooms which can be reserved online. Staffing is a combination of library and IT personnel along with student assistants. The building is open 24 hours a day, five days a week.

E. Service philosophy. The Loyola IC service philosophy is composed of the three C's of collaboration, connectivity, and community. These ideas are based on what today's student most needs in the library: 1) spaces to study, work, and be together; 2) up-to-date technology; 3) robust network connectivity; 4) library and technology expertise; and 5) information resources. Allow me to review what each of the three C's means and how we have responded at Loyola.

F. Collaboration. Students more and more find themselves working in groups, whether focused on formal team projects including class presentations or in informal study groups. Therefore, like other institutions, our information commons provides a variety of options for this type of activity: 1) 30 group study rooms, each with a computer and a wall-mounted monitor in the larger rooms; 2) four seminar rooms accommodating up to 12 persons, also equipped with technology; 3) six 24-seat digital classrooms; 4) large tables in open study areas; and 5) groupings of soft seating throughout the building.

G. Connectivity. To support communication needs, multitasking, and social networking, our information commons offers 222 desktop computers (both PC and Mac), 50+ circulating laptops and several iPads for in-building use, and robust wireless access throughout. Other features supporting technology needs include a website for 24/7 access to numerous library online resources and a digital media lab. The latter features Mac desktops for high-end audio and video editing, an audio studio, and equipment circulation (cameras, headphones, tablet computers, podcasting equipment, microphones, portable devices such as digital voice recorders, hard drives, and DVD players, and more).

H. Community. Sociologists speak of the concept of the "third place," a location apart from where we live or go to school or work. It is the place we spend our free or leisure time. It could be a café, club, or community center. It was our intent at Loyola University Chicago that the IC would be the "third place," a destination where students would want to be when not in class, in their residence, or at work. It would be a comfortable and inviting place, a safe environment, a place to see and be seen by friends. To achieve this goal, we offer a wide variety of flexible study spaces (700 seats) that accommodate different learning styles, one floor devoted to silent study including a quiet reading room without computers, a café, and long hours of operation. Our location on Lake Michigan provides users with relaxing, beautiful views of the water year round.

I. Services. Library services in the IC include 1) a help desk staffed by reference librarians and technology specialists; 2) one-on-one reference consultations by appointment; 3) library instruction classes; 4) workshops on digital library resources; 5) circulation; and 6) book pickup and return. Technology services comprise 1) troubleshooting problems with personal laptops; 2) solving network access and password problems; 3) workshops on the use of software, especially editing programs like Adobe Photoshop; 4) color and poster printing; and 5) equipment circulation. All these services are regularly reviewed and modified as user needs change.

J. Keys to success. The University Libraries' partnership with Information Technology Services has been a success throughout the five years of operation due to a number of factors: 1) a steering committee of key players from both areas; 2) regular staff meetings and instant messaging (IM) communication; 3) consultation on problems; and 4) continual assessment of services, web site, equipment use, and other issues. While there have been problems and

disagreements at times, these matters have typically been resolved quickly and easily due to a willingness to communicate and be flexible along with honest, open discussion.

K. Lessons learned. All information commons staff at Loyola have worked hard to serve our patrons and fulfill their needs and expectations. In the process, we have learned a number of important lessons which might be helpful to others planning an information commons: 1) a written Memorandum of Understanding documenting each partner's expectations is essential; 2) a joint Management Steering Committee is critical; 3) careful planning is important and a continual process, as is assessment; 4) one must define success criteria for assessment purposes; 5) timetables and expectations can and will change, therefore, 6) be flexible with your operational partners and users; 7) share ideas with your associates and brainstorm on problems and services; 8) listen to front-line people; 9) don't be afraid to experiment; 10) there are two different environments: day and night, each requiring different service attitudes and approaches; 11) students want both noisy and quiet areas; noise complaints will always be an issue; 12) choose flexible, moveable furniture; 13) there are never enough electrical outlets; and 14) cross-training may or may not work for library and technology staff; it didn't work for us.

L. Summary and future directions. As noted earlier, even with success one cannot be satisfied with the status quo. Because user needs will change as technology advances and as pedagogical methods evolve, the IC must adapt and be transformed. At Loyola University Chicago, we are in the process of becoming a *learning commons (LC)*, a situation in which the library is an even more an integral part of teaching and learning. To this end, we are focusing on increased numbers of workshops to teach our students how to better utilize the information and technology resources at their disposal. We have implemented a series of programs which involve faculty and librarians in discussion around topics of mutual interest such as use of technology in the classroom, social media, digital humanities, electronic textbooks, and teaching partnerships. A series of "flash seminars" featuring our faculty giving brief talks on subjects as wide ranging as philosophy and the environment has proven to be an effective way for students to become engaged with their professors outside the classroom.

Beagle [ibid., p.17] noted that "the IC becomes an LC when its resources are 'organized in collaboration with learning initiatives sponsored by other academic units, or aligned with learning outcomes defined through a cooperative process.'" At Loyola, our partnerships with ITS academic resources, the faculty development center, the campus writing center, and individual faculty, are moving our highly successful information commons toward the learning commons model, providing opportunities for learning outside the classroom, fostering creativity, and offering a platform for the creation of knowledge. We continue these efforts and more, with enthusiasm and optimism as we move further into the 21st century.

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