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The information and learning commons: some reflections

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THE INFORMATION AND LEARNING COMMONS: HISTORY, PROBLEMS, AND FUTURE VIABILITY

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The Information and Learning Commons modes of library organization has become more prevalent over the past few decades and allows academic libraries to provide wider-ranging and more cohesive services to their constituents. Several issues, including relying upon a single, mythical "Patron" in planning for services; poor organization; a lack of cohesion and centralized leadership; and the "digital divide" may hinder the effectiveness of the Commons and negatively impact both patrons and staff. If these problems can be surmounted, this model shows great promise for both current and future application in academic libraries.

KEYWORDS: Academic libraries, Literacy, Information Commons, Learning Commons, Digital Divide

The Information Commons and Learning Commons model of academic library organization may be the wave of the future. Allowing for the meshing of numerous services, this model maintains the traditional reference and research elements of the classic library while adding exciting new services. It also provides a library environment that promotes both silent and social communal study. In addition, this model implements and supports new technologies and services in a larger, seamlessly integrated environment. This paper will investigate the development of the Information and Learning Commons model in college and university settings as well as discuss the problems associated with the current applications of the Commons model. Finally, this paper will hypothesize whether or not this model will become a permanent part of the library landscape as well as speculate on the implications of this model of library service for the future of academic library services.

The concept of the Information Commons (alternatively called the Information Arcade, the Information Hub, Media Union, or Learning Commons) developed in the 1990's. Since the 1980's libraries had been moving to a more patron-centric, learning-centered, and user-friendly model of library public services (Bailey and Tierney 5). Only a select few Information Commons libraries evolved in the early 1990's with increasing numbers appearing over the next decade and

a half. A 2004 survey of members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) showed that five of the seventy-four libraries who responded to the survey had established an Information Commons prior to 1995; eight additional Information Commons appeared during the years 1996-2000 and nine more between 2002 and 2004 (Haas and Robertson 11-12). While the terms Information Commons and Learning Commons are frequently used interchangeably, it is important to recognize where the two models differ. The Information Commons, "a cluster of network access points and associated IT tools situated in the context of physical, digital, human, and social resources organized in support of learning," (Beagle xviii) is created to "support learning" (Bennett "The Information or the Learning Commons" 183). The Learning Commons is an evolution of the Information Commons in which the basic tenets of the Information Commons are enhanced and expanded upon in order to create an environment more centered around the creation of knowledge and self-directed learning. It thus goes beyond the traditional environment that fosters the transmission of information from staff to patron (Bailey and Tierney 2). While the terms are often substituted for one another, the Learning Commons model is actually a more advanced evolution of the original Information Commons.

Scott Bennett views the change from traditional libraries to the Information/Learning Commons model as part of a larger shift in the structure and focus of academic libraries. The earliest libraries, he says, were focused on the reader (the user). In this reader-centered paradigm, libraries provided spaces where the user had easy access to other parts of the library as well as designated space in well-lit parts of the library building for patrons wishing to read (Bennett "Libraries and Learning" 181-182). In the twentieth-century, libraries shifted to a book-centered paradigm. In the ensuing years; books had become so numerous and easily available that academic libraries were now strained beyond their physical capacity to house and care for all of

their monographs and print journal holdings. This paradigm lead to libraries designed to efficiently hold the collections of the library rather than libraries designed primarily to serve the needs of the patron (183-185). Thanks to the benefits of technology, this paradigm, however, is being replaced by a learning-centered paradigm in which users once again hold the position of importance. The increasing use of electronic rather than print serials as well as the increasing use of eBooks and other electronic resources means that the academic library is now free to shift its attention back to users and their needs (185-188). Information is still plentiful, even overabundant; but its increasingly electronic nature allows libraries to reappropriate space that had been previously occupied by shelving and use it for more user-centered purposes. The Information and Learning Commons model is the outgrowth of this learning-centered paradigm.

The Information and Learning Commons model incorporates many elements of the traditional library (books, a reference desk, circulation and interlibrary loan services, etc.) while also including other elements that provide useful services both to the library's patrons and to the university as a whole. According to Donald Robert Beagle, the Commons model, when it is applied properly, includes three levels, the Physical Commons, the Virtual Commons, and the Cultural Commons. The Physical Commons consists of the computer hardware, furnishings, designated spaces, and traditional collections of the library. The Virtual Commons contains the digital library collections, online tools, electronic learning tools, and Web presence (portal, website, etc.) of the library. The third element, the Cultural Commons, is made up of the workshops, tutoring programs, research collaborations, etc. that takes place as a result of the environment created through the Commons (Beagle, 3-10). These three levels combine to form a more comprehensive and inclusive version of library service.

This Information/Learning Commons model, then, must contain sections of the physical space designated to serve different patron study needs. Some areas will be designated for silent, individual study, while other sections will provide furnishings and an atmosphere to encourage group collaboration on projects. Collections of print, visual, and electronic resources will be available for patron use in addition to other electronic resources including tutorials, the library website and catalog, and other electronic learning tools. Programs like writing assistance, peer and professional tutoring, basic technology assistance, special assistance on more complicated technology projects, etc. will also be provided at convenient times to Commons' users. In a 2008 survey conducted among Association of Research Libraries (ARL) institutions, the most common components of The Information/Learning Commons reported among the institutions were spaces designated for different types of study, tutoring and support services, classes and workshops, and instructional spaces (Stuart 8-9). Together, these elements make up some of the most important parts of an Information/Learning Commons.

Although the academic library is the location in which the Information/Learning Commons has perhaps the greatest potential for achieving the full degree of implementation and success, the information commons model can also be employed in either a school library/media center or in a public library. In the school library/media center, this transformation can have a smaller but similar impact to that which it has in an academic library. The metamorphosis of a previously sleepy and book-dominated school library environment to one that encourages innovation and collaboration among students is made possible by the same increase in technology that has permitted similar transformation in academic libraries; this Commons model, when implemented properly, can have much the same effect in a school library as it does in an academic library (Diggs 32-38). The Information/Learning Commons model can also be found,

albeit less frequently, in the public library environment. One major issue that the Commons model faces in the public library setting is the issue of the "digital divide" between the technological "haves" and the "have-nots." While the issue is still present in the academic and school library environments, there is frequently a higher concentration of tech-savvy patrons in secondary and post-secondary schools (Beagle 139-158). Furthermore, users of academic and school libraries are often forced to learn how to use the resources the library makes available in diverse formats in order to complete their research and assignments. Public library users, who most often support the library with their taxes, have greater leverage in demanding resources in the formats that they prefer.

Thus, the most common site for implementation of the Information/Learning Commons model is still the academic library, in part because of the increased benefits it can provide both for the library and the university when competently applied and administrated. Properly implemented in an academic library, this model of library service has potential benefit for all parts of the university. A cohesiveness of purpose among the diverse elements of the library (reference and circulation services, technology support, writing centers, tutoring, etc.) allows both the library and the university to run more smoothly and efficiently. Student needs are met in an environment that is designed to provide multiple services in a single location. Staff members are also trained to respond to questions that arise from these services. Not only are members of the library staff in a better position to assist their patrons with a broad array of problems, but the patrons are also able to find both assistance and solutions in a single location rather than being forced to trek from office to office across the university campus.

Problems arise when the application and practice of this model does not match the ideals of the concept. A poorly implemented Information/Learning Commons can cause problems both

for patrons and for library staff. Unfortunately, even in the age of the Information/Learning Commons, libraries, librarians, and library researchers can easily fall into the trap of planning structure and programming for "the Patron," some mythical individual who represents their entire constituency. This practice harms both libraries and their patrons. While planning for "the Patron," who may or may not represent the majority of a library's users, large segments of the library's actual constituency may end up ignored and their needs forgotten. Most academic communities include many different types of students, from non-traditional older students, who may be returning to school after an extended period of time in the workforce, to part-time students who also work full-time jobs, to the traditional 18 to 25-year-old members of the Millennial Generation.

For the patron without a great deal of technological know-how, regardless of age, a poorly implemented Information/Learning Commons can be more difficult to use than the traditional library. While the traditional library offered row upon row of books and bound journals, the new Information/Learning Commons has a limited number of monographs and print journals, frequently relegated to a limited number of regular shelves or to an installation of compact shelving. Increasingly, serials are available only online. More and more frequently, libraries are deciding to purchase electronic books instead of print copies. Other resources are increasingly available only electronically, which can make things difficult for patrons without home computers or high speed Internet access. The lack of technological savvy or of familiarity with the structure of digital resources can also frustrate students.

The so-called "digital divide" is a very real problem in academic libraries. This disparity between those with the skills and access to technology, especially the Internet and other information resources, and those who do not have this ability or access can make the difference

between graduating and dropping out. Not only do these disparities currently exist, but they will likely remain a constraint on effective library use for the foreseeable future (Boyd-Barrett 20). As technology continues to change, students with difficulties understanding and using technology can be overwhelmed or left behind. As technology expert Stewart Brand said, "Once a new technology rolls over you, if you're not part of the steamroller, you're part of the road" (9). Students on the wrong side of the "digital divide" can feel as if their libraries have abandoned them. Even those students who have the technological expertise to comprehend and use library technology can be limited by their ability to afford a home computer or broadband Internet access.

For returning students, especially those out of school for a long time or without good technology skills, this new model of library organization can be confusing in the best of circumstances. Older students are returning to school for a variety of reasons--to grow personally, to improve their careers at work, or, especially in these troubled economic times, to gain a new career skill set because the careers in which they have invested a large part of their lives are disappearing. As a result, most academic libraries are encountering more returning students, many of whom have rarely, if ever, used computers, let alone learned how to access eBooks or to find journal articles in electronic databases. Not only that, but these students frequently commute to class. While more traditional on-campus students have the opportunity to use the library's resources onsite, these students do not necessarily have this option and may not have access to the Internet or a computer at homes either. When the Information/Learning Commons is working efficiently and cohesively, the needs of these students are provided for, whether through library orientations, technology courses, one-on-one assistance, effective and clear help screens, or in-library peer assistance. The library should also deliver these services in

person or online as appropriate. Unfortunately, when the Commons is not properly structured or working cohesively, these students can easily be left behind. Their lack of library skills can lead to poor classroom performance and a feeling of disillusionment both towards the library and the university in general.

The problems of the "digital divide" are not limited only to older or returning students. Call them what you will--the Millennials, the Google Generation, Generation Y. Most expect members of this generation born between 1979 and 1994 to be technologically competent (Sweeney 1; Becker 345; Pletka 35). These so-called "digital natives" are the first generation to grow up with computers and the Internet. Chances are that they do not remember the first time they used a computer. Many regularly use computers for both school and entertainment. P. Ragains describes the Millennial generation as having "grown up around computers their entire lives and spent all of their teen years searching the web [and] armed with superior technical skills" (35). Nonetheless, the digital divide remains a significant issue, even among members of the supposedly technologically savvy Millennial generation. Charles Becker strongly rejects this notion-of Millennials as "digital natives." He calls it "a dangerous myth and a primary example of how labeling a generation is a disservice" (350). Maureen E. Wilson agrees and adds that "technologically disadvantaged" students, who are frequently first-generation college students and often come from working-class families, may have much less access to technology than their peers, which can hinder them in their educational pursuits (66). Research supports this assumption by finding that similar percentages of Americans from the 19 to 29 age bracket (83%), the 30 to 49 age group (82%), and the 50 to 64 age group (70%) use the Internet (Britton 4). Contrary to the generational stereotype, a significant number of Millennials arrive at college without the basic technological understanding required to function in the university environment.

They may have their cell phones perpetually glued to their ears or their thumbs permanently attached to their texting keyboard; but they are significantly behind their peers in basic computer abilities, a sad reality that has been observed personally by the first author while working in medium to large undergraduate library. Becker reports similar problems; students he observed were unable to perform a number of basic computer tasks like uploading and downloading files, creating spreadsheets, etc. (351-352). The reality may be actually worse than these observations. Some students arrive without any understanding of how computers work at all (i.e. the ability to log into a computer, use a word processing software, do a basic Google search, etc.).

Furthermore, many if not most members of the Millennial generation arrive at the university with little understanding of the key elements of information literacy. These students are certainly accustomed to working in an environment where they have a great deal of choice, something upon which they thrive (Sweeney 2-3). On the other hand, "students come in with entertainment digital experience, but that does not translate into academic digital knowledge" (qtd. in Becker 351). As a result, many of them do not understand what makes some sources more reliable than others or that the library actually pays for the electronic scholarly resources it provides (Frand 16). In this sense, then, even those students who arrive at the university with a modicum of technological know-how frequently arrive with little to no **information** proficiency. In a university setting, this ignorance can be almost as crippling as a lack of general technological savvy.

Students unfamiliar with technology or lacking information literacy can be ill served in a poorly structured Commons. Confusing signage, uncertainty about the responsibilities of the various units in the Commons, or even a general sense of disorientation and disconnectedness can all impact these students. The purpose of the Commons is to support the patrons of the

university in finding the information they need and in educating and empowering them to find information on their own. The returning student with little to no experience with technology or the incoming young adult with poor information skills may find it difficult to come forward in search of assistance in a confusing and poorly structured Commons. These students may know so little that they cannot even formulate a useful question. As a result, the Commons has a strong chance of failing that student.

For the aforementioned student groups, a properly functioning Information/Learning Commons provides the necessary supporting services to ensure that they are brought up to speed with their classmates and learn how to meet the requirements of scholarship demanded of them by their professors. When the Commons does not function as intended, however, these students can be overlooked; their problems can remain unnoticed or untreated. Universities may have the means to assist these students; but, just as happened in the previously fractured environment, the necessary services are difficult to find so that students may give up before they receive the assistance that they so desperately need. In this case, the Information/Learning Commons has failed in its purpose, both as a library and as an integral element of an efficiently functioning university.

The patron lacking technological acumen is not the only individual who may suffer as the result of a poorly implemented Information/Learning Commons. If a Commons is not well organized or if elements of a Commons do not communicate well with one another, patrons and members of the Commons staff can quickly become frustrated. The whole point of integrating the various elements of the Commons into a single unit is to eliminate the confusion and inefficiency caused by the previous model of separate services. In actuality, a poorly operating Information/Learning Commons may be worse than no Commons at all. With the previous

model, patrons expected inefficiency. The elements of the Commons were originally independent, self-regulating offices and services. Since each unit was autonomous, patrons did not expect any single office to be able to speak to the policies, hours, etc. of any other unit. The Information/Learning Commons, however, is intended to function as a single, cohesive unit in which each element of the Commons can help with any Commons-related matter, or, at the very least, direct patrons to the correct individual or office to meet their needs. Patrons expect the elements of a single entity (the Commons) to function in harmony and communicate with one another. When the Commons does not work properly, patrons can quickly become dissatisfied with both the individual service point and the Commons in general. This dissatisfaction can eventually lead patrons, many of whom are in desperate need of the services the Commons can provide, to stop entirely using the Commons.

Inefficiency in the Commons environment can also have a serious impact on the employees of the Commons. When elements of the Commons do not communicate, employees look uninformed or unqualified. Patrons frequently take out the frustration caused by this inefficiency on employees, whether the problem is the fault of that particular employee or not. Not only is it maddening for a member of Commons staff to be unable to assist patrons by giving them the correct information on other units within the Commons, but being constantly harassed and berated by patrons can also be very demoralizing for employees who are serious about their jobs and who are working hard and doing the best they can with the information they have.

Ultimately, inefficiency in the Commons affects all parties involved. Patrons become first frustrated and then disillusioned with the operation of the Commons. As a result, they take their anger out on the staff, who can quite easily become frustrated both with the patron and with the Commons system in general. It ends with neither staff nor patron happy with the Commons

model. Patrons are less likely to return and use the services of the Commons; staff members are fed up with the whole inefficient system and less likely to perform well in the future.

This is not to say that there is no hope for the Information/Learning Commons system. If it is properly implemented and well managed, this system can produce amazing benefits for patrons while providing a pleasant work environment for Commons staff. Strong, centralized leadership for the Information/Learning Commons is imperative to its proper functioning. The best model is centralized control in the hands of a strong leader where all the divergent elements of the Commons report to this single individual. This model makes Commons-wide decision-making simpler and more straightforward. A centralization of leadership and policymaking within the organization allows the Commons to be run more efficiently.

A commitment to efficiency also requires clear lines of communication among all elements of the organization. Communication keeps units from wasting time duplicating services provided by others or even working toward conflicting goals. This commitment to strong, coherent leadership and communication makes the entire system run more smoothly by keeping each element up-to-date with the goings on of the other units and by allowing them to better and more efficiently fulfill their own responsibilities.

Similarly, with adequate attention paid to technology education, those students who enter the Information/Learning Commons with deficient technology skills can be educated, both in groups and individually, in order to bring them to the same level as their classmates. Even with comprehensive computer education, there will, however, be some members of the academic library community who will never be able to function as well as their peers in using technology. As a result, the Commons needs to go out of its way to provide special services for these individuals as well. Recognition of the problems inherent in poor applications of the

Information/Learning Commons models and careful attention to avoiding these problems results in a library that functions well for all types of students in the current academic library environment.

As for the future of the Information/Learning Commons model, it seems that, if libraries take care to avoid the aforementioned issues and pay careful attention to changing patron needs, this model should remain sustainable for the foreseeable future. Research into the information literacy of children and young adults indicates that while they, like the current college generation, have had a great deal of exposure to technology, their searching skills are not developed to a point that makes them information and search savvy. A 2008 study commissioned by the British Library found that while children may use technology more frequently that their older counterparts, their level of information literacy is not necessarily greatly improved (*Information behavior* 12). Additionally, even today's children are not necessarily "growing up digital," despite all efforts to encourage this behavior (Meyers, Fisher, and Marcoux 303). They do not have the skill set necessary to evaluate resources. Their searches primarily used simple search tools and basic searching methods (*Information behavior* 14). When children and teens search for information and attempt to determine its validity, they are using "varying and often naive criteria" (Meyers, Fisher, and Marcoux 323). Many of the problems that current university students, and, as a result, the university libraries are experiencing are not likely to end soon. Today's children and teens have many of the same information needs as their older counterparts, which suggests that libraries will have a continuing need for programs to enhance information literacy and technological understanding. Implementation of the Information/Learning Commons model today will provide a solid foundation for dealing with the needs of younger members of the Millennial generation as they begin their post-secondary education. A properly functioning

Commons with provisions for the technologically shy or illiterate will also meet the needs of returning students who may not have the same degree of technology experience as their younger peers.

Ultimately, the Information/Learning Commons model has great potential for success. The development of the Commons system, made possible by the explosion of electronic resources, has freed libraries from servitude to the size of their print collections and allowed them to make themselves more in tune with the needs of their patrons. The Commons has gradually come to require more than just a building containing redesigned computer workstations. The modern Learning Commons includes these physical features but also provides a vast selection of electronic and supplementary resources and services for the library and university communities. As an ideal model and one open for change, this model falls short when it is not properly implemented or administered. Patrons with limited knowledge of technology, as well as those with a low degree of information literacy, can feel marginalized and forgotten when the Commons model does not work properly. In addition, problems of leadership and communication can negatively impact both patrons and staff. However, with proper application and oversight as well as a flexibility and heightened attention to changing patron needs, this model shows great promise for both current and future library service.

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