The information commons as a collaborative workspace

Chuck Malenfant
Giovale Library, Westminster College, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the evolving concept of "Information Commons" through the documentation of one library's renovation and the comparison of that library's experience with the earlier theoretical and case study literature.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper cites gate counts, a user-satisfaction survey, and examples of emerging collaboration between library and information technology staff as evidence of substantial changes in how the library is used by both staff and students following its transformation into an information commons.

Findings – This paper finds that the library's transformation into an information commons has resulted in dramatically high gate counts, indications of user satisfaction, and anecdotal evidence that demand for reference service is increasing. The author also finds that, perhaps equally as important, the blending of information technology and library staffs as the information commons was implemented has led to a number of collaborative partnerships developing among them.

Practical implications – Shows that the Westminster College's experience has transformed its library to an information commons, and demonstrates how one library chose to remain a vital and effective resource for its students.

Originality/value – The paper shows that although a growing number of libraries are moving towards various forms of an information commons, few case studies describing how these changes have affected library services one year or more after the changes have been made have appeared.

Keywords Academic libraries, Library buildings, Information facilities

Paper type Research paper

When the Giovale Library of Westminster College decided to transform into an information commons (IC), it was done within the larger context of the Library's merging into the College's Information Technology (IT) department, a process which began in June of 2003 and continues to this day. While one of the most important stated objectives of the project was to create a collaborative learning environment where students, faculty and staff could work together with technology, two other important objectives have been the blurring of organizational lines between the Library and IT staff and increased cooperation and networking among them. By committing wholeheartedly to the creation of an IC as a complete physical and organizational renovation of the Library and IT, we find ourselves one year later in a space that has proven wildly popular with our campus community as well as particularly fertile for Library/IT relationships and collaboration.

Westminster College

Founded in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1875 as the Salt Lake Collegiate Institute, Westminster College is the only private liberal arts institution of higher education in Utah and one of the very few in the region. Westminster College offers 24 undergraduate degree programs as well as master's degrees in Nursing, Business,

Reference Services Review
Vol. 34 No. 2, 2006
pp. 279-286

0090-7324
DOI 10.1108/00907320610669506

Professional Communication, and Education to approximately 2,500 students from 27 states and 16 countries. Westminster College is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities as well as by various professional accrediting bodies in Nursing, Business, and Education and is a member of the Associated New American Colleges.

The Giovale Library was built in 1997, is about 48,000 sq. ft, and holds approximately 150,000 books, print periodicals, videos, and other materials. The Library also provides access to approximately 35,000 e-books and approximately 100 online databases – including approximately 15,000 full-text online periodicals – through institutional subscriptions and through membership in the Utah Academic Library Consortium. The Library has a fully-networked computer classroom dedicated to library instruction, an Assistive Technology Lab, and an abundance of study carrels and study rooms. On its lower level, the Library building houses the campus IT facilities, and, organizationally, the Library has been a unit of IT since the summer of 2003, with the Library Director reporting to the VP for Information Resources. Also on the lower level of the Library building, IT runs a General Computing Lab with 50 computer workstations and a Faculty Technology Center devoted to the integration of technology into teaching on the Westminster campus through WebCT, faculty workshops and support.

The Library staff consists of five professional librarians: a director, two reference and instruction librarians, a systems librarian, and a technical services librarian, all of whom share reference, collection management, and teaching responsibilities. The Library also employs four full-time paraprofessional staff and depends on a continuous supply of student help throughout the academic year.

What is an "information commons"?

"Information commons" can mean different things for different institutions. Clement (1995), for example, describes the IC as a designated physical place within the Library building (p. 47). Beagle (2002), similarly posits the IC as an administrative unit within the Library (p. 288). Other writers are more expansive, describing the IC as a continuum ranging from a shared Tech/Reference help desk to a physical and organizational overhaul of the academic library. MacWhinnie (2003) writes of the IC as being a place within the library as its "simplest form" (p. 244), with a more ambitious vision including the addition of collaborative workstations, high-tech classrooms, and more (p. 244). Indeed, authors like Beagle who portray the IC as a physical space within an existing library view its effects, partnerships, and new opportunities for teaching and learning radiating out across campus (Beagle, 2002). In fact, Beagle's (1999) earlier work provides a compelling and well-illustrated rationale for why academic libraries need to change to an integrated IC model and a graphic conceptualization of the merging of services. White and Rutherford (2002) use the term to describe a specially-designed high-tech classroom. And all of these models are apart from the use of the term to describe a virtual environment hosting public domain information (e.g. Lee, 2003) or to describe all the information resources we hold in common as a nation (Kranich, 2003).

In practice, the answer to the question of just what an IC is remains somewhat amorphous. Albanese (2004a) notes this (p. 30) in his article describing the renovation of the Mount Holyoke library into an IC, published with a sidebar (Albanese, 2004b) covering a selection of IC projects at other institutions. (For additional discussion on the literature of the IC concept, see Cowgill *et al.* (2001), pp. 432-3).

Our administration and staff, being ambitious, opted for "all of the above" when defining what our IC would be. There would be a complete renovation of the main level of the Library, including the installation of collaborative workstations, a Writing Center, and a café; and there would also be an organizational and philosophical shift: the implementation of the IC model would constitute the gradual merging – to what degree is still to be seen as the process plays out – of staffs and services of the Library, IT, and the Writing Center.

Our information commons

Westminster College has long been committed to recruiting students in part by offering the best educational facilities possible, and, by the spring of 2003, the Library had released an "information commons Project Team" report to the campus, illustrating the proposed transformation of the Library into an information commons as the best way to keep the Library a vital and effective resource for students. The Report was based on the Project Team's research and input from Richard Meyer of Georgia Tech, who was hired as a consultant. At this time, the College was involved in a long-term strategic planning process that would lead to several continuing goals and initiatives, and the Library and IT were successful in making the construction of an information commons one of them.

The report and subsequent conversations among Library and IT staff and administration made two factors apparent:

(1) The transformation of the Giovale Library into and IC would happen fast.

(2) This transformation would mean a substantive change in the Library/IT organization and in the way the campus community was served.

Our information commons: the physical space

The change would have to happen fast. Because Westminster is a small campus, even a small construction project in the library would represent a major disruption in service, so the Library/IT organization decided that all of the construction for renovation and remodeling would happen over the summer of 2004, a time when the Library experienced minimal user traffic. This would entail:

- The installation of compact shelving on the lower level of the library to create space on the main level for new collaborative workstations.
- The subsequent shifting of the collection.
- The installation of additional electric and network support for the new collaborative workstations.
- The installation of the collaborative workstations themselves.
- The glassing-in and remodeling of two former reading alcoves to create a Writing Center and a large group meeting room with an overhead LCD projector and a Smart Board.
- The removal of periodical shelving from a former alcove and that alcove's remodeling into a café.
- The lowering and remodeling of counter space adjacent to the reference desk into a second computer workstation to offer tech support.

To prepare for this remodeling, librarians devoted as much time as possible during the 2003-2004 academic year to weeding the collection to minimize the shifting that would have to be done over the summer. Library/IT staff and administration also spent this time making as many firm decisions as possible about furnishings and other details, and in visiting the newly opened ICs at nearby Brigham Young University and Weber State University to gain as much insight as we could from their experiences; choosing, for example, seating similar to that chosen by BYU and sound-proofing material similar to that chosen by Weber State.

Because construction would be fast and furious, the staff and administration agreed that we would forgive ourselves if everything wasn't completed on time and open in the fall of 2004 with whatever we had ready to go in any event. This proved to be good foresight: when the IC opened in the fall of 2004, the soundproofing had not been installed, the large group study room was not yet equipped, the multimedia workstations were not yet equipped, and staffing the Café remains a thorny issue to this day. Nevertheless, our IC opened, warts and all, and has proven to be a popular and successful enterprise.

Campus response

Campus response has been overwhelmingly positive. As shown in Table I, the increase in our gate count for the 2004/2005 academic year over the 2003/2004 academic year was dramatic (with the exception of December, 2004, during which the gate counter was malfunctioning), and this dramatic increase in traffic was in spite of a modest decrease in enrollment. The increase ranges between an additional 1,303 visits in March to a whopping 6,877 additional visits in October. For the entire academic year, our gate count went up from 143,382 for the 2003/2004 academic year to 173,272 for the 2004/2005 academic year, an increase of 29,890, or approximately 20.85 percent. This is in line with Halbert (1999) observation that increased access to technology results in increased gate traffic and, in fact, longer stays by users (p. 90).

In the same article (Halbert, 1999), it is noted that the Reference staff perceives their service to have improved. Similarly, at Westminster College we have noted a marked increase in the number of reference transactions we have conducted as well as a general improvement in service overall. More students are coming to the Library, therefore more students are becoming aware of our resources and services, therefore more students are asking questions about these resources and services and we are experiencing more "teachable moments" during which one-on-one instruction can

	2003-2004	2004-2005	Increase by month
September	21,181	23,365	2,184
October	22,513	29,390	6,877
November	17,998	24,086	6,088
December	13,619	13,655	36
January	13,400	17,766	4,366
February	12,904	18,131	5,227
March	20,555	21,858	1,303
April	21,212	25,021	3,809
Total increase			29,890

Table I.
Monthly gate counts before and after the IC

occur. Unfortunately, our Library has not kept regular statistics of reference transactions, so this cannot be demonstrated numerically.

During December, 2004 and January, 2005, the IC ran a "user satisfaction" survey to try to gauge student reaction to the renovations and new services. Although the response rate was very low (182 responses from a student body of approximately 2,500), the responses were positive, showing that many of the respondents had visited the IC six times or more in the single semester since it had opened, that the majority of respondents rated the workstation usability, the technology available in the IC, and the library resources available in the IC as "Good" or "Excellent"; and, of those respondents who had technical or reference questions, the majority rated the help they received as "Good" or "Excellent".

Based on this evidence, we have judged our conversion to an IC model to be completely successful. What has been perhaps more interesting, however, has been the growing partnerships among the staffs of the various areas of our IC.

Our information commons: the organizational/conceptual space

This transformation would mean a substantive change in the Library/IT organization and in the way the campus community was served. Administration was adamant that this project would mean more than the addition of extra computer workstations to supplement the existing General Computing Lab on the lower level.

In support of this, custom furniture was ordered for 16 new collaborative workstations on the main level, allowing two to four people to sit and work comfortably in front of a single computer. Two of these workstations were designated as "multimedia stations" and equipped with high-end graphics- and audio-capable computers and software. A Writing Center was installed adjacent to the Tech Help/Reference Desk and the collaborative workstations. A café was also installed along with comfortable furnishings in group arrangements.

The change in the Library/IT organization and in the way the campus community was served, being a bit more abstract an outcome, was not something that could be accomplished with in a single summer's construction efforts. Along with the physical placement of computer workstations next to the print reference collection, and the addition of a Tech Help staff workstation next to the librarian's at the Reference Desk, the administration was interested in blurring the lines generally between the Library and IT, and in having a greater number of the staff from each area working with each other more familiarly and on more projects.

Some have written that the integration of IT and Library staff is necessary to the success of the IC (e.g. Halbert (1999)), and Mozenter *et al.* (2003) provide an excellent literature review on the cross training of paraprofessionals in general. Crockett *et al.* (2002) confront head on the need for library and IT staff members to meet on common ground and minimize "turf wars" in the name of providing better service to students while reporting the results of a survey they conducted to look at IC staffing at academic libraries. Lippincott (2004) goes further in exploring the opportunities a renovation such as ours creates for collaboration across campus, and we have tried to make the most of them. Over the last year, our transformation into an IC has led to several specific and advantageous collaborations.

The Writing Center is run, by a professor from the English Department who was hired for this purpose on a new faculty line and who gains course release time for his

administrative duties in our IC. Although he did not officially start work at Westminster until the fall of 2004, he was in touch with us over the summer and able to give his input on the design and equipment provided in his new Writing Center. Subsequently, the Writing Center Director and his staff have participated fully in IC activities, such as planning campus-wide ad campaigns, the design of the user satisfaction survey, and the cross training of staff. Furthermore, Librarians tell students of all disciplines something about the Writing Center in library instruction sessions and student orientations, and the Writing Center Director and his staff of peer writing consultants direct students in need to the nearby Reference Desk or to the appropriate library resources and services on our web site. The Writing Center's presence in the IC has also been a boon to library relations with the English Department, one of the largest bodies of faculty on campus.

The Faculty Technology Center, a unit of IT located on the lower level of the Library building, has been bundled into our conception of the IC insofar as its Head is also supervisor of the General Computing Lab staff. The General Computing Lab, also located on the lower level of the Library building, is supplemented by the new collaborative workstations upstairs on the main level, and it is members of the General Computing Lab staff who now log hours at the Tech Help Desk next to the Reference Desk.

The Faculty Technology Center works increasingly closely with the Library on the cross-training of Circulation and Tech-Help Desk staff. This has occurred through annual start-of-the-school-year training sessions at which staff representing the entire IC are present as well as through ongoing discussions among leaders from Circulation, the Lab, the Writing Center, and Reference about what skills IC staff should have in common, leading to a greater understanding among all IC staff of the various resources and services offered by its various branches – Library, Writing Center, and Lab.

Circulation staff, for example, have taken much of the responsibility for basic maintenance of the printers located in the collaborative workstation area on the main floor – keeping them full of paper, changing the toner cartridges, and notifying IT when they are malfunctioning, etc. Additionally, Circulation and Reference staff are planning on being trained in the basic use of the multimedia workstations. For their part, Lab staff at the Tech Help Desk now have floor plans to the Library and are becoming accustomed to answering directional questions, have taken over part of the process of making student IDs (a responsibility once borne solely by the Circulation staff), and are notified along with Circulation and Reference staff of current Reference issues, such as a run by a certain class being made on the same article, or a particular problem that a lot of students seem to be having with a particular research assignment.

When the author was hired, he was charged with building closer ties between library instruction and the Faculty Technology Center. This has been achieved in part through the ongoing discussions described above. In the context of defining the Lab staff's role in the IC, the author got to know the Faculty Technology Center staff and began working with them on other projects. Thanks to support from the Faculty Technology Center, the Library now offers its First Year Composition library training on the hybrid WebCT model, and, in the fall of 2005, the Library began offering its first custom WebCT library research modules in one undergraduate Nursing course and one undergraduate Biology course. Also new for the fall of 2005, another Reference and

Instruction librarian worked with the Faculty Technology Center on the implementation of a program-wide WebCT template for the College's MBA program.

As a final example, IT and the Library now offer their introductory new/transfer/graduate student orientations in tandem in a series of simultaneous sessions in computer classrooms across campus. Incoming students learn about their network IDs and passwords, campus computer support, WebCT, the General Computing Lab, the Writing Center, and Library resources and services from the same people in the same room during the same sessions. Also, when Library staff attend Admissions open houses and other campus recruiting events, they come prepared with displays and information related to the entire IC: the Writing Center, the Library, and the Lab. We believe these activities are supporting the perception on campus of the Giovale Library Information Commons as an integrated set of resources and services.

Conclusion

Does the above mean that all lines have been blurred and the various units making up our IC have dissolved seamlessly into one new organization? No. While stopping short of acknowledging any turf wars, some borders are still respected. For example, the units comprising the IC still maintain discreet web pages, internal policies, and chains of command. And while the Lab staff and Library Circulation staff continue to discover common ground, it is less apparent how far the Writing Center staff can be integrated into the IC as a whole.

In any event, the process that we have developed *ad hoc* as we implemented our IC – collaborating among units when we have a shared purpose; keeping to ourselves to address responsibilities and duties best handled within our respective units – is working well for us. It may be that we never do fully integrate, never fully erase those lines between our units, and, five years from now, may find ourselves more easily compared to a condominium board overseeing the maintenance of a shared building than to single organization built from corporate mergers. As long as our administration and our staff are committed to meeting our students' needs, however, our IC should continue to thrive.

References

Albanese, A.R. (2004a), "Campus library 2.0", *Library Journal*, Vol. 129 No. 7, pp. 30-3, available at: http://search.epnet.com/ (accessed 30 October 2005).

Albanese, A.R. (2004b), "The future is now", *Library Journal*, Vol. 129 No. 7, pp. 32-3, available at: http://search.epnet.com/ (accessed 30 October 2005).

Beagle, D. (2002), "Extending the information commons: from instructional test bed to Internet2", *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 28 No. 5, p. 287, available at: http://search.epnet.com/ (accessed 30 October 2005).

Beagle, D. (1999), "Conceptualizing an information commons", *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 25 No. 2, p. 82, available at: http://search.epnet.com/ (accessed 30 October 2005).

Clement, A. (1995), "Bringing all the 'users' to the centre", *SIGOIS Bulletin*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 46-7, available at: http://portal.acm.org/ (accessed 30 October 2005).

Cowgill, A., Beam, J. and Wess, L. (2001), "Implementing an information commons in a university library", *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 27 No. 6, p. 432, available at: http://search.epnet.com/ (accessed 30 October 2005).

Crockett, C., McDaniel, S. and Remy, M. (2002), "Integrating services in the information commons: toward a holistic library and computing environment", *Library Administration and Management*, Vol. 16 No. 4, pp. 181-6.

Halbert, M. (1999), "Lessons from the information commons frontier", *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 25 No. 2, p. 90, available at: http://search.epnet.com/ (accessed 30 October 2005).

Kranich, N. (2003), "Staking a claim in the information commons", *Knowledge Quest*, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp. 22-5, available at: http://search.epnet.com/ (accessed 30 October 2005).

Lee, D.R. (2003), "Constructing the commons: practical projects to build the information commons", *Knowledge Quest*, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp. 13-15, available at: http://search.epnet.com/ (accessed 30 October 2005).

Lippincott, J.K. (2004), "New library facilities: opportunities for collaboration", *Resource Sharing and Information Networks*, Vol. 17 Nos 1/2, p. 147.

MacWhinnie, L.A. (2003), "The information commons: the academic library of the future", *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, Vol. 3 No. 2, p. 241, available at: http://muse.jhu.edu/ (accessed 30 October 2005).

Mozenter, F., Sanders, B.T. and Bellemy, C. (2003), "Perspectives on cross-training public service staff in the electronic age: I have to learn to do what?!", *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Vol. 30 No. 29, pp. 6-404, available at: http://search.epnet.com/ (accessed 30 October 2005).

White, P. and Rutherford, S. (2002), "The wired classroom", *College and Research Libraries News*, Vol. 63 No. 9, p. 642.

Corresponding author
Chuck Malenfant can be contacted at: cmalenfant@westminstercollege.edu