Evolving a new model: the information commons

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Abstract

Purpose – The article aims to provide a historical context for the information commons model in college and university libraries, reviewing trends in reference services, user expectations, technology and facilities planning. It suggests future directions for expansion of the information commons model and provides URLs for academic libraries with information commons of note.

Design/methodology/approach – The article serves as a frame for three other articles in this issue on information commons.

Findings – In the 1990s, the move to "rethink reference" services intersected with the "library as place" movement. This collision, combined with changes in technology and users' expectations, resulted in the information commons model.

Research limitations/implications – The literature review is not exhaustive.

Practical implications – The article provides a succinct review of recent historical trends in academic libraries as well as an overview of recent technological changes that have affected our users.

Originality/value – The article is not a case study and does not focus on any one academic library. The value of the piece is its historical perspective and identification of future challenges and trends.

Keywords Facilities, Information transfer, Libraries, Learning

Paper type General review

Introduction

The news from the front lines is that the information commons established in college and university libraries are a success. These new spaces are wildly popular with students and are putting libraries back at the center of campus life. If your library doesn't already have an information commons, changes are good that it's planning for one.

This issue of *Reference Services Review* features three articles that chronicle the planning, implementation and assessment of information commons at Brigham Young University (Provo, UT), Indiana University (Bloomington, IN) and Westminster College (Salt Lake City, UT). These success stories offer interesting insights and raise important questions as libraries continue to refine and evolve this new service model. It is perhaps then an appropriate time for academic libraries to consider what the next iteration of an information commons will be.

How did we get here? A look back

> The transformation of the library from a collection of materials and related services to a diffused, perhaps even amorphous, information support system implies significant change for librarians. Traditional roles most often do not fit well in the new world; the roles that evolve may not be linear descendants of the old. We must not only solve the technical problems associated with moving from traditional information handling to a total information support system, but also confront the transition facing the library professional (Molholt, 1985).

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Over 20 years ago, Pat Molholt, then the Associate Director of Libraries at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, envisioned an information support system that combined time- and location-independent use of resources, access to productivity software and on demand assistance from both people and expert systems. She advocated that libraries take a leadership role and partner with university computing centers to develop an integrated system for researchers; and, she rightly predicted that developing these systems would require public services librarians to develop new service models and assume different roles.

Looking back, I wonder how this vision struck librarians at the time. Reference librarians had already taken on and mastered online catalogs and database searching. They were in the process of deploying the first standalone CD-ROM workstations in their reference rooms and wondering how "end users" would perform their own searches. In that environment, the system Molholt described must have seemed futuristic indeed!

During the 1990s, vendors developed web-based interfaces for our catalogs, and databases migrated from workstations to local area networks and then to the web. More and more of these databases featured full-text and full-content resources. Some of these products offered powerful features that required software plug-ins. Libraries grappled with whether or not to support full functionality by allowing limited access to productivity software, and reference librarians found themselves unwittingly (and sometimes unwillingly) becoming troubleshooting experts. As the year 2000 approached, resources and services such as wireless access, laptop lending, e-books and virtual reference cemented the reference librarian's relationship with technology. The line between reference assistance and technology support seemed blurrier than ever.

During this same period, librarians also observed that the expectations of our students and faculty seemed to be changing as well. Pagers, mobile phones and palm pilots increasingly set the standard by which the speed of access to information was judged. A host of time saving, customizable consumer services, many web-based, made library services seem slow and laborious by comparison. Our users were buying and selling on eBay®, trading stocks online, keeping in touch with Instant Messenger™ and customizing their browsers with tools like MyYahoo!®. They wanted immediate and remote access to online, full-text materials, not to stand at a photocopier with a stack of bound journals. They wanted the library environment to mirror the technology-driven information environment to which they had grown accustomed.

Lastly, the 1990s saw marketplace competition for library-type resources, services and spaces. Jeff Bezos founded Amazon.com® in 1995, providing quick, easy and affordable access to books and media. Bezos believed that, unlike a physical space, a web-based bookstore could offer customers the "convenience of browsing a selection of millions of book titles in a single sitting" (Amazon, 2006). Even so, brick and mortar bookstores capitalized on the aesthetics of space to create library-like experiences for their customers. Retail chains such as Borders and Barnes & Noble rejected the "book warehouse" approach and built stores that featured coffee shops, wireless internet access, programs and events, comfy club chairs and – yes – information desks.

These changes in our environment posed a serious challenge to the viability of the academic library as the primary source of information services and resources. Students and faculty had new and attractive options for accessing information – options that

did not include a trip to the library or queuing up to ask questions at a service desk. As gate counts and reference transaction statistics fell, academic libraries responded aggressively. In 1993, librarians convened for meetings at the University of California, Berkeley and Duke University to "rethink reference." Trends and alternative service models from this period include:

- Tiered services that expanded the number of service desks to address different types of information needs;
- The merger or consolidation of services that reduced the number of service desks to provide "one stop shopping" for users;
- "Roving," "roaming" and "floating" (Rettig, 1993) librarians who walked the reference room to engage users rather than wait behind a service desk;
- Appointment-based research consultation services; and
- The active involvement of users in service design and planning.

Some of the central components of the information commons are not present here, most notably the need to partner with other campus units. In retrospect, however, we can see the crack in the fault line forming. Librarians were exploring solutions that diverged radically from our traditional past.

During the 1990s, we also witnessed the "library as place" movement. Reference librarians became increasingly involved in the planning and development of physical spaces to support both social activities and student learning outside the classroom. Academic libraries built coffee shops, extended hours of operation, installed wireless networks and created comfortable, inviting and inspiring spaces for academic work. Libraries revised food and drink policies and abandoned the notion that the library was a silent space designed for individual study. By the year 2000, user expectations would drive the new service models to intersect with changing ideas about library spaces and push us closer to the information commons.

The information commons arrives

It was in 1999, Donald Beagle, formerly the Associate Director of Library Services and Head of the Information Commons at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, noted that the phrase "information commons" was used to describe both "an online environment in which the widest possible variety of digital services can be accessed" and "a new type of physical facility specifically designed to organize workspace and service delivery around the integrated digital environment" (Beagle, 1999). By 2004, the Association of Research Libraries had identified three elements shared by most information commons: the availability of both research and computing assistance, a "one-stop shopping" location for a variety of library services, and a staffing model that includes "librarians, computing professionals, and other public services staff" (Haas, 2004).

The partnerships and service models that once seemed unrealistic and unwieldy have become increasingly commonplace for academic libraries. As of 2006, the academic library is transforming the typical university labyrinth of writing centers, career centers, tutoring services, computer labs and more into a logical and seamless suite of blended services for their constituents. Libraries report that these new spaces are overwhelmingly popular with students, and it is easy to understand why. First, the

information commons model recognizes and nurtures the ubiquitous nature of students' relationship to technology, the need for connectivity and the desire to multitask. The model also facilitates collaborative work, an increasingly common choice for class assignments. Lastly, it builds upon and supports our faculty's increasing use of technology and course management software.

Building on success: what's next?

The success of the information commons model has reinforced the idea that it is possible to build effective partnerships with other campus units to deliver enhanced library services. Librarians have learned that many of our traditional library services, such as reference, are more resilient and adaptable than we thought. Librarians have also learned that we ourselves can be flexible in assuming new roles.

So, what is the next step? What does the next evolutionary stage of the information commons look like? What futuristic vision will be the norm in five years? In the next ten to 20 years? Perhaps the following questions are a place to start:

(1) Does the current model focus principally on undergraduates? How do we adapt or expand the information commons to best serve graduate students and faculty?

(2) Should libraries limit collaboration to other campus units or develop new services with commercial partners? With other libraries?

(3) What is the relationship of the information commons to the library Web site? At what points do they connect? Is there a digital information commons?

(4) Is the current model weighted too heavily towards technology alone? How do specialized services and non-digital materials, such as special collections and archives, fit into the information commons?

(5) Will this new research environment radically change the nature of reference and information services? What skills and competencies will be required?

The three articles on information commons in this issue begin to move us in these directions. Their authors discuss the installation of satellite information commons locations throughout the library, development of an assessment program, the evolving nature of reference service in a commons environment as well as the unexpected benefits of collaborative campus partnerships.

In the fall of 2005, EDUCAUSE sponsored a two-day focus session on "The Design of Informal Learning Spaces." Targeted to information technology professionals, architects, facilities managers, librarians, teaching faculty and university administrators, the session focused on the creation of "informal learning spaces – libraries, lounges, labs, and cybercafés" to complement the more traditional classroom or lecture hall (EDUCAUSE, 2005). While information commons were a part of the discussion, speakers identified a wide range of campus spaces that could be designed to support and encourage student learning, including: outdoor areas, hallways, dining facilities, waiting rooms, faculty offices and even laundry rooms (Chism, 2005). Brown and Long discussed the shift from information commons to learning commons, a model distinguished by a focus on student learning, information creation, integrated campus services, social learning spaces and the integration of technology with a wide range of

human activities (e.g. "eating, discussing, writing, drawing, thinking, being social, being private, etc.") (Brown, 2005).

More and more, colleges and universities are "creating informal spaces to encourage students to mingle, collaborate, share and network with other students and faculty," and the academic library should be at the heart of that enterprise (EDUCAUSE, 2005). Perhaps we should ask ourselves if the information commons is a place inside the library or the library itself? How libraries adapt all spaces and all services for all users in a way that replicates the success of the information commons may be our next great challenge.

To learn more

- Brigham Young University, Information Commons, Harold B. Lee Library, www.lib.byu.edu/departs/gen/ic/
- University of Guelph, Learning Commons, McLaughlin Library, www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/
- University of California, Los Angeles College Library Instructional Computing Commons, www.clicc.ucla.edu/
- Indiana University Information Commons. Herman B. Wells Library, www.libraries.iub.edu/ic/
- University of Tennessee, Knoxville, The Commons, John C. Hodges Library, http://commons.utk.edu/
- Westminster College, Westminster Information Commons, Giovale Library, www.westminstercollege.edu/library/tour/infocommons.cfm
- Yale University Teaching and Learning Experimental Space, Cross Campus Library, http://www.library.yale.edu/cclexp/

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