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Transforming Library Service Through Information Commons: Part 1 - Introduction

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Transforming Library Service Through Information Commons: Case Studies for the Digital Age.

D. Russell Bailey and Barbara G. Tierney, 2008.

Introduction

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Change is a constant in libraries, and the tide of technology innovation rises without ebb. The commons—information, learning, research, and teaching—embodies and nourishes this culture of change, making it imperative that we library and information professionals not only accept but also embrace change and innovation. It is also necessary that we prudently plan, design, and shepherd effective change in resources and services, that we train and educate ourselves and colleagues to lead, guide, and thrive in this culture of change and innovation. In so doing, we not only provide the most effective and influential resources and services for our patrons but, more important, bequeath this natural propensity to productive change as our professional legacy to students, colleagues, and patrons.

Although many of our patrons are “digital natives” of the “digital tribe” (also known as the Net Generation, millennials, or neo-millennials), most library and information professionals are “digital immigrants.”¹ We were not “born digital” but have become digital, have immigrated into the digital realm. As digital immigrants, we are well equipped to guide our patrons in both digital and nondigital realms as well as all areas in between—this, too, is part of our legacy.

This volume of case studies was conceived and produced as a gateway to resources that assist and facilitate the professional’s work in designing and manifesting effective change in facilities, informational resources, services, and staff. It is intended for several vested groups:

- library, information, and other institutional administrators who are planning strategically and tactically how to improve library services
 - library and information staff who are determined to energize and improve their library and information enterprises
 - library and information professionals who are seeking ways to become and remain more vital and energized in the next five to fifteen years of their professional lives
 - students of library and information studies who are searching for pathways to maximize self-actualization in their careers
- This volume serves as a practical guide to enhance and diversify our services and resources; prepare for and facilitate ongoing change and evolution; and provide substantive, richly representative stories from professional practitioners in real settings.

Enhancement and Diversity

For generations, scholars and library and information professionals have developed more deeply than broadly, have educated and trained in a narrow area. This approach is sometimes called the “toothpick-shaped” or “|”-shaped” model. Our curricula and libraries have developed similarly in support of the “|”-shaped” model. We are now realizing that depth (or even multiple areas of depth) and breadth—broad and multifaceted development— are mutually and vitally important. Technology professionals, for example, have conceptualized a “T-shaped” approach to development, with the vertical part of the T representing traditional science/ technology learning and the crossbar pointing to competencies from nonscience/nontechnology disciplines. Likewise, humanist professionals have conceptualized an “H-shaped” professional approach,

where the crossbar of the H is field-specific knowledge and skills and the vertical bars relate to areas not specific to field, such as context and community. ² Library and information professionals have begun to realize that we too must break out of the “|”-shaped” model—the narrow and isolated mold— and diversify.

The commons (facilities, resources, and staff) both embodies and facilitates this type of diversification— lateral and vertical integration, the seamless continuum of services and resources, the mutual inclusion of high-touch and high-tech. The commons library professional is both sinew and central force—the “virtualist,” “hybrid” professional who develops and continues to renew and grow in numerous areas of relative expertise, embracing all media, multiple subject areas, high-touch and high-tech, as mutually inclusive cultural phenomena. The commons is the framework in which these new professionals teach and thrive. The commons is the teaching and learning laboratory in which information literacy and research education are the curriculum.

Ongoing Change and Evolution

Professional and paraprofessional staff in the field of library and information services can no longer train and tool themselves for static, lifelong careers but rather must constantly evolve. We must be active and dynamic in order to thrive. The commons as teaching and learning laboratory embodies and facilitates effective evolution in services, resources, and staff development. We must transform ourselves several times in our careers to remain current, vibrant, and vital. Although college graduates will likely change jobs ten times in the two decades following graduation,³ the commons provides to library and information staff and patrons the dynamic arena for such ongoing change.

The commons culture constantly scans for adaptable emerging technologies and integrates them into the repertoire of research and productivity tools available to patrons and staff. In the commons culture, the scan-adapt-scan-adapt modus operandi becomes an integral part of the culture vis-à-vis emerging and traditional technologies and tools.

Substantive Contextual Materials

The academic literature on the commons has been growing since Garrett Hardin’s 1968 treatise “The Tragedy of the Commons.”⁴ The most substantive academic piece on the information and learning commons is *The Information Commons Handbook* (Beagle et al., 2006). The present volume seeks to complement the *Handbook* by providing context based documentation, evidence, and practical first person “stories” from twenty diverse and successful commons implementations. Additional content— updates, images, and the like—can be found at <http://www.ala.org/editions/extras/Bailey09584>.

In their work on the teaching commons, Pat Hutchings and Mary Taylor Huber provide helpful insight into the value and richness of deeply contextual materials presented by commons practitioners. The commons derives its character and value from the notion of property jointly held and usable for collective ends, to foster collaboration and cooperation, and to do so without the need for specific permission. The teaching commons, like the information and learning commons, focuses on practice, and its “practitioners must participate in the effort if it is to have real consequences.” The rich representations in the twenty commons stories in this volume provide the details of particular cases, which facilitate and enhance their generalizability. As Hutchings and Huber note, real stories encourage and create real learning and growth: “People read biographies and autobiographies and use them to guide their own lives and decisions.”⁵ We are most pleased to bring to the reader these case studies—these commons biographies— of intelligent library and information professionals determined to provide access to dynamic, vital, and evolutionary teaching and learning laboratories in their particular iterations of the commons.

Notes

1. Diane G. Oblinger and James L. Oblinger, eds., *Educating the Net Generation* (EDUCAUSE, 2005), <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/pub7101.pdf>.
2. National Leadership Council, *College Learning for the New Global Century* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007), 16.
3. *Ibid.*, 2.
4. *Science* 162 (1968): 1243–48.
5. Mary Taylor Huber and Pat Hutchings, “Building the Teaching Commons,” *Change* 38, no. 3 (2006): 25–31.