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Transforming Library Service Through Information Commons: Part 2 - Definitions

D. Russell Bailey

Providence College, drbailey@providence.edu

Barbara Tierney

University of North Carolina at Charlotte, bgtierne@email.uncc.edu

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

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

chapter one

Definitions: Information Commons and Learning Commons

Although the terms *information commons* and *learning commons* are often used interchangeably, it is helpful to understand them as different levels of a similar concept. Information commons is the earlier term (dating from the early 1990s) and probably designates earlier iterations of the commons concept. *Media union* and other terms were also used, but these were usually unique to a particular institution.

In this chapter we describe two levels of information commons (adjustment and isolated change) and then two levels of learning commons (far reaching change and transformational change). Donald Beagle began using these differentiated levels in 2004 (in *Strategic Planning for the Information Commons*), based on recent work by the American Council on Education (in *Taking Charge of Change*).

Information Commons

Generally defined, the information commons is a model for information service delivery, offering students integrated access to electronic information resources, multimedia, print resources, and services. The information commons provides students the opportunity to conduct research and write their papers at a single workstation. It is a single location where one can find resources (e.g., on how to write a paper or troubleshoot a computer or network problem), access numerous databases (both indices and full-text) or the library's online catalog, navigate the Internet to visit websites, and use selected software for research. Tools such as Microsoft Office are available, giving access to file processing and production and complementing robust e-mail, scanning, and other technological capabilities.

- Specifically, an information commons (levels 1 and 2)
 - is *physically* located on one or more floors of a library;
 - provides *access* to *traditional* library services (often called "high-touch"), including general information, library catalog access, reference services, reserves, circulation, and interlibrary loan;
 - constitutes a *high-technology-rich* environment (often called "high-tech"), including high-speed networks and public access computers of various types as warranted for patron needs;
 - provides various resources (hardware, software, support) for what was formerly considered a "computer lab," plus various specialty computer lab configurations (e.g., scanning lab, multimedia lab) *integrated* in terms of space, desks, staff, and training into the traditional library services;
 - provides a full range of *productivity software* (e.g., MS Office, SPSS/SAS, ArcView, Mathematica/ Maple, Adobe Acrobat, Photoshop, OmniPage, Illustrator, Premiere);
 - makes available to patrons the "electronic continuum of knowledge media" (Donald Beagle, 1999), which is often called the *virtual commons*;
 - provides various *collaborative* learning and work spaces;
 - emphasizes Beagle's *continuum of service* (1999): information search and retrieval; processing and interpretation of information; and packaging, presentation, and production in any and all media;

provides near-seamless *integration* from the patron's perspective in terms of space, services, resources, service desks, and staff and incorporates appropriate *cross-training* for many staff;

remains *library-centric*: "owned" and overseen by library staff, even though combining library and computer-lab resources—that is, does not include resources and services that are traditionally from outside of the library; can be seen (per Beagle and the American Council on Education) in one of two levels:

- *Level 1*. An adjustment—for example, a computer lab with basic productivity software in the library, with resource access and some coordination; minimal space design implications; remains library-centric.

- *Level 2*. An isolated change, including all aspects of the first-level information commons plus additional resources and services—for example, a computer lab with a broad range of multimedia productivity software and formats, access to all resources and extensive integration of space, resources, and staff into the continuum of services, with significantly altered patterns of service, aligned with institutional mission; remains library-centric.

Learning Commons

In general, the transformation from information commons to learning commons reflects a shift in learning theory from primarily *transmission* of knowledge to patrons toward a greater emphasis on *creation* of knowledge by commons staff and patrons and patrons' self-direction in learning. A learning commons includes all aspects of the information commons but extends and enhances them.

Levels three and four in the commons continuum constitute the learning commons. Each of these levels includes all aspects of levels 1 and 2 plus additional resources and services. Specifically, the learning commons includes all aspects of the information commons, but to a greater extent

- is *clearly and explicitly aligned* strategically with the institution-wide vision and mission—that is, is a dynamic and active partner in the broad educational enterprise of the institution, not just the library-centric enterprise;

- imbues *most of the library* with the integrative (services, resources, staff, desks) perspective;

- includes traditional ("high-touch") and technology-rich ("high-tech") tools and resources;

- provides a fuller range of technological resources, *more seamlessly integrated* • makes available *more, more varied, and more adjustable collaborative work spaces*;

- extends the "electronic continuum of knowledge media" to emphasize *more creation and construction of knowledge*

is *not library-centric*—that is, it brings into and includes within the "library" many formerly external functions and activities and extends into the former homes of these functions and activities, such as

- faculty development center or center for teaching and e-learning • integration of the library into a course management system—WebCT, Blackboard, and the like • centers for writing, learning support (tutorials), special programs (e.g., honors), learning communities, career counseling

- many collaborative work spaces of greatly varied types, sizes, and adjustability

- greater emphasis on the far end of the continuum—creation and construction of knowledge in institutional repository- and open archives-type activities

- faculty "shared offices," collaborative spaces in library

- may include such less-traditional library functions and activities as exhibitions, readings, performances (music, dance, theater), gaming, lectures, dances (one institution holds its annual fall freshmen dance in the library), panel discussion, institution-wide forums on

important/current/controversial topics, miniature golf, design-to-fabrication laboratories (e.g., MIT's Fab-Labs) can be seen (per Beagle and the American Council on Education) in one of two levels:

- *Level 3.* A far-reaching change—adding a faculty development/teaching and e-learning center, course management system integration, virtual reference; where the entire enterprise is more collaborative and not library-centric (includes and integrates activities beyond traditional library services plus computer-lab services).
- *Level 4.* Transformational change— adding closer strategic alignment, greater functional integration, including knowledge-creation activities such as an institutional repository (e.g., D-Space, Digital Commons, ContentDM), writing-/ authoring-across-the-curriculum involvement, including an integrated curriculum-support laboratory, greater involvement within and beyond the library of a fuller range of institutional functions and activities in breadth and depth; including some aspect of planning, design, knowledge (and perhaps product) creation/construction/fabrication (e.g., MIT's Fab-Lab initiative) and not library-centric.

All the various commons iterations—information commons levels 1 and 2, learning commons levels 3 and 4—have many similarities in concept and character, which imbue all commons facilities, resources, and staffing models. All commons emphasize the seamless integration of high-touch/ low-tech with high-tech/asynchronous interactions and are strongly and intentionally focused on patron needs. The varieties, permutations, and transmutations of the commons share character and spirit. They differ primarily in robustness and complexity, which are determined by funding resources and particulars of the institutional context.