Learning Commons Project Team Report

Abridged Version

September 14, 2007
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APPENDIX  

HBL Level 1 Floor Plan Proposed
INTRODUCTION
A village commons belongs to the entire community and benefits both the individual and society, by providing an open, central space dedicated to the enrichment of all. In the context of a public institution of higher education, such as the University of Connecticut, a commons might be conceived as a space formally established to foster the learning of all.

The university library is an example of a common space where each individual is free to pursue his or her own learning. But the traditional library, with its focus upon catalogs, indexes, book stacks, and quiet study carrels, does not always meet the learning needs of today’s student. The millennial student functions more comfortably in a digital environment than a paper one and, as a result, embraces strategies for learning that differ significantly from those of previous generations.

The 20th century learning environment was primarily lecture and textbook-based; it was directed, sequential, document-focused, rules driven, and individualistic. Today’s 21st century learners grow up in an environment that is hyper-textual, technology-focused, feedback rich, transactional, and social. Students are now asked to take a more active role in their education, and collaborative and self-directed investigations are encouraged.

Colleges and universities are experimenting with ways to engage these new learning styles in order to maximize student achievement. One of the most successful experiments to date has been the establishment of a large, centralized area called the Learning Commons: a space deliberately designed to foster collaborative and interactive learning outside the classroom. The Learning Commons brings together, in one convenient environment, tools and support services that enable students to research, develop, enhance, produce and finalize their academic work assignments. These tools and services include computer workstations; printers and scanners; research databases; academic software programs; collaborative work areas; IT help; reference sources; research advice; and tutoring assistance. Libraries are supporting this transformation by dedicating prime real estate for this purpose.

The recommendations in this report come from a team made up of Library and Institute for Teaching and Learning staff who have been envisioning, planning, and building the Learning Commons @ UConn since Summer 2006.
CHARGE
In late May of 2006, a project team made up of staff from the University Libraries and the Institute for Teaching and Learning was established to develop a plan for a Learning Commons at the University of Connecticut.

The Learning Commons Project Team was charged to

- perform an environmental scan for learning commons best practice in academic libraries;
- perform a University-wide scan for potential service partners;
- review services currently being offered on HBL Level 1 in conjunction with potential new services that might enhance student learning;
- share developing plans with stakeholders and evaluate feedback;
- propose a new integrated service plan that directly supports student learning, student empowerment and encourages user independence.

The team was asked to include in their review reference & research services, software assistance, IT technical help, information cafe workstations, microlab workstations and softwares, laptop circulation, photocopying, digital reformatting, the Learning Resource Center services, the Writing Center, the Q Center, social science data services, instruction classrooms, collaborative spaces, lounge spaces, tutoring rooms and study areas, as well as other university services that might be appropriate for such a space.

Level 1 of the Homer Babbidge Library was identified as the area of focus because many of the elements of a Learning Commons are already in place and readily available to the community late into the night. These include: a large computer lab offering access to a variety of licensed academic software; internet cafes for information exploration and retrieval; hands-on information technology training rooms; wireless Internet; IT support; and reference and research services. Other Learning Commons features were already under development in this space including the Learning Resource Center, a computer competency tutoring area; a writing tutoring area; and a quantitative skills tutoring area.

A target of $100,000 for Learning Commons renovations on Level 1 was originally estimated.

Update reports were submitted December 18, 2006, and May 25, 2007.
ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN
Stage 1 of the learning commons planning—a review of the literature; an environmental scan for best practice; virtual and in-person visits to selected learning commons sites; and a consolidation of what had been learned—took place during the summer of 2006.

We found that the following statement by Joan Lippincott was helpful in clarifying the mission of a learning commons: “The key purpose of the information commons is to leverage the intersection of content, technology, and services in a physical facility to support student learning.” (Lippincott, J.K. 2006. “Linking the information commons to learning,” Learning Spaces, Oblinger, ed., p. 7.6, Educause) Throughout our discussions we came back again and again to the three concepts united in this statement “leverage the intersection of content, technology, and services”; “in a physical facility”; “to support student learning.”

We soon discovered that, while there were many similar elements in the various learning commons that have been established in academia, no two were exactly alike. Their scope ranged from having extensive services conveniently located in one large dedicated area to declaring an entire multi-story research library a learning commons. We also discovered that many spaces identified as “learning commons” or “information commons” were little more than clusters of computer workstations set out in a library reference area.

Still, the features that had proven generally successful in learning commons spaces were easy to identify:

Common Resources
- computer workstations
- networked printing
- scanning
- wireless connectivity
- group studies
- group instruction spaces
- lounge and social space
- a café (nearby)

Common Services
- writing assistance
- computer technology assistance
- library research assistance
- tutoring

Other resources and services found in some of the larger commons include: assistive technology; digital media technology; student supplies; career advising, academic advising, university IT helpdesk.

While it was helpful to conduct virtual visits to learning commons spaces world-wide, we felt it was also important to view a learning commons space in person. One of our team had visited the University of Arizona’s commons; two had visited the Mount Holyoke
commons; but it was during our visit to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst that we came to truly understand the opportunities such a space could offer. We are particularly indebted to the Learning Commons staff at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for hosting a site visit for our planning team and discussing in detail the issues that are involved in such a project. It was this experience in particular that turned our planning toward optimizing the space for student learning.

While the designated space on Level 1 of the Homer Babbidge Library had many of the elements found in a comprehensive learning commons such as the ones at the University of Arizona and the University of Massachusetts, some important features were absent: most notably, distinct group study spaces; rooms specially outfitted for the tutoring centers; digital media editing stations; self-service scanning; and modern lounge spaces.

Our next step was to consolidate the fruit of our environmental scan in a media presentation that could be shared with members of the university community (see Appendix B).

The project team has continued to monitor the academic environment for learning commons developments by attending conference sessions and reviewing relevant documents in the literature and online. Below are links to two recent learning commons/information commons survey reports that we found particularly useful:


Joan K. Lippincott, Associate Executive Director, Coalition for Networked Information
CONVERSATION WITH THE COMMUNITY
Stage 2 of the planning process, which began in September 2006, called for the team to share the learning commons concept with the university community and to gather new ideas, suggestions, and other feedback from student groups, library staff, undergraduate education service managers, university enterprise managers, faculty, and administrators, so that the Learning Commons at UConn might become as useful as possible for our local community. Over the fall semester the team met with a variety of university groups in 11 separate meetings. These groups included:
- Administrators
- Undergraduate Student Government Academic Affairs Committee
- Undergraduate Education Service Managers
- University Enterprise Managers
- The General Education Oversight Committee
- The Provost’s Council
- Senior Class Gift Coordinating Committee
- The Student Welfare Committee
- The Provost’s Library Advisory Committee
- Library Staff
- Foundation Staff

Not surprisingly, the most excited and engaged were those representing the undergraduate student body. They immediately saw the impact a learning commons could make on their success as students. The commons space they envisioned would

- be easily accessible
- be transparent
- be self-service
- provide the physical and virtual resources one would need to complete assignments
- offer quiet study spaces, collaborative study spaces, and social spaces
- provide a technology-rich work environment
- accommodate both individual and group learning
- provide comfortable furniture
- provide technology assistance when needed
- offer tutoring, advising, and research assistance when needed
- be attractive, clean, and welcoming

It was interesting to see how closely our student wish list matched the elements documented in reports of successful learning commons we had researched.

These conversations confirmed that the learning commons would be a welcome and viable resource in the community; they revealed a strong interest in consolidating academic support services; in particular, they helped to underscore the need on our campus for a centralized space dedicated to learning outside of the classroom; finally, through these conversations we came to understand the value of the learning commons as a support mechanism for the General Education skills competencies required of all undergraduates (See Appendix C).
PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT
Stage 3 of our Learning Commons development began in January. During this phase we began to review the space on Level 1 for the commons development; to plan features of the learning commons that there was general agreement upon; to cost out equipment, wiring, and furniture options; and to review current services and staffing in preparation for a new layout and service plan. Our goal was to have a service plan ready by August so that funding recommendations could be part of the Libraries’ annual equipment purchasing discussions in early September.

In our planning we paid particular attention to the learning commons elements that have proven to be most successful at other institutions. These include:

- 200 + freely accessible computer workstations for both individuals and groups
- technology enhanced group study rooms
- a digitizing lab for creating multi-media presentations
- reference and research assistance
- tutoring services
- technology assistance
- hands-on computer training rooms
- lounge and social spaces.

Our environmental scan made clear that a learning commons will never be static in nature, but must be conceived as a space that is continually evolving and adjusting to current needs (see Appendix D). And so, in planning, we have tried to allow as much flexibility and mutability as possible.

Review of Current Services
A survey of the seven user services on HBL Level 1 and Plaza was conducted to identify their centrality to the Learning Commons. These seven services were:

Q (Quantitative) Center
Writing Center
Learning Resource Center
Reference and Research Assistance
Library ITS Service Desk
DD/ILL
iDesk (Plaza)

The survey report findings are presented in Appendix E.

Of the seven units surveyed, five were identified as enhancing the Learning Commons:

Q (Quantitative) Center
Writing Center
Learning Resource Center
Reference and Research Assistance
Library ITS Service (in part)
In addition to helping students accomplish their daily academic work, the Q Center, the Writing Center, the Learning Resource Center, and the Reference service each supports one of the five General Education skills competencies established by the University Senate: computer technology, information literacy, writing, quantitative skills, and second language.

The Library ITS Service provides support for computing in the library including printing, copying, scanning, faxing and wireless connectivity, and has a strong service ethic. While the ITS Service Area achieves significant operational efficiencies uniting staff help desk operations and staff copying and scanning services with public service operations, the resulting hybrid does not well serve the learning commons environment: the workflows generate a relatively high level of noise and activity in a zone where quiet is preferred; and prime floor space is devoted to office equipment, office workstations, desks, and supplies storage that would be more appropriately and attractively housed behind the scenes.

The services of the iDesk and DD/ILL are focused primarily on non-learning commons activities and are not directly integrated into the commons at this time.

**New Services**

**iStudios**
The feature most often found in a learning commons, apart from computer workstations, is an array of group study spaces. As yet, group studies have no representation on Level 1 and so the introduction of defined group study spaces became one of our highest priorities. The spaces we envisioned as glass-walled group learning rooms suitable for 4-5 individuals, each equipped with a workstation, dual monitors, white board, table, chairs, data, and power.

**Media Studios**
University students in the twenty-first century are turning to digital media to enhance their academic assignments. Once accessible only to graphic design students, digital media has become increasingly accepted and encouraged in both the liberal arts and the professional schools. Learning commons media studios would offer students from all academic programs access to audio, video, and photo editing software. With assistance from the Learning Resource Center staff, students would be able to create or edit digital renderings.

**Anticipated use**
Users of the media studios would have the opportunity to:
- edit digital video files
- edit digital audio files
- create digital audio files
- create animation files
- import licensed audio and video files
- incorporate digital and audio files into a presentation or website
- scan analog photos and texts (up to a certain size)
- burn files to cd’s or dvd’s
- save files to their own external hard drives or (for smaller files) to memory sticks

Users would need to bring their own external drive or memory stick for storing files. The media studio service and equipment would be handled by LRC staff.

**Second Language Tutoring**

Of the five General Education skills sets required by the university, the only one not currently represented on HBL Level 1 is Second Language and Culture. On August 8, the planning team met with Katharina von Hammerstein, Associate Professor of German, Chair of German Studies, Director of the Linkage through Language Program, and incoming GEOC chair, to discuss adding Language and Culture to the Learning Commons Program. Language and Culture is one of the five General Education skill competencies required for all undergraduates. About 20% of incoming undergraduates have yet to complete their second language requirement and many others elect to study further in their chosen language or seek to master additional ones. Providing a location in the Learning Commons for the enhancement of language skills was enthusiastically endorsed by Dr. von Hammerstein.

Currently Modern and Classical Languages (MCL) offers tutoring in Spanish, German, French, and Italian; Arabic and Chinese are being added. The Modern and Classical Languages Department also runs a Multi-Media lab for language skills improvement.

Three concepts were discussed for the Level 1 Learning Commons:
- Establishing a tutoring space similar to that of the Writing Center
- Establishing a lounge area with language dictionaries, newspapers, and magazines
- Establishing a TV/Video viewing area for foreign language TV and Video

A committee is being established to review the options for integrating Second Language and Culture programs into the Learning Commons. Members are to include Norma Bouchard (Head of MCL), Barbara Lindsey (Director of the MCL Multimedia Lab), Manuela Wagner and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi (Applied Linguists in German and Spanish), and Patricia Parlette (coordinator of MCL tutoring).
LEARNING COMMONS STATEMENT OF PURPOSE
Based upon the environmental scan, the conversations with community members, and review of current and potential services, the following learning commons statement of purpose was developed:

_The University of Connecticut Learning Commons offers a suite of services, technologies, and study spaces to help students successfully complete academic assignments and attain proficiency in the General Education competencies required by the University._

Integrating the General Education competencies into the structure of the Learning Commons affirms these skills as fundamental to the education of every undergraduate student. The Learning Commons will serve as a physical manifestation of the university’s commitment to the principles of general education and visibly underscore the value of each individual skill set in the context of all the others.
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE
Learning Commons Project Team Recommendations for Phase 2.0

Phase 1 of The Learning Commons @ UConn (Learning Commons 1.0) has, from the start, been envisioned as only the first piece of a more comprehensive Learning Commons initiative at the University of Connecticut. The first phase, which has primarily focused on Level 1 of the Homer Babbidge Library, includes both modifications and additions to existing service points and spaces, the sum of which increase the Commons’ effectiveness to support a range of learning-based activities (solitary and group work/studying, tutoring, using computer-based technologies, etc.). However, while the conceptual shift marked by the creation of a Learning Commons is significant, the physical changes have been primarily cosmetic in nature: funding and space limitations have kept the goals of the initial phase necessarily focused on “what we can do now.”

Learning Commons 2.0 (LC2.0) is a working term for a more fully-realized Learning Commons initiative at the University of Connecticut. Learning Commons 2.0 addresses the inevitable shortcomings of the initial, short-term stage of the project. LC2.0 aims at meeting the longer-range goals of The Learning Commons @ UConn, goals that were articulated at the outset of the project and underscored by subsequent environmental scans, meetings with stakeholders in the UConn community, and site visits. Objectives for the physical space include, on the Storrs campus, opening up the Commons to incorporate not only more locations in the Babbidge Library but also neighboring campus resources. LC2.0 services encompass such things as the increased visibility of Languages & Culture as an integral element of the Commons and the increase of study, work, and lounge areas. At the regional campuses, LC2.0 explicitly mandates the creation of dedicated Learning Commons @ UConn spaces on each campus and the funding of relevant resources.

Learning Commons 2.0 – Global Learning Commons
If phase 1 of the Learning Commons project has been local in its focus, Learning Commons 2.0 is global in all senses. The Learning Commons @ UConn has since its inception been conceived of as a University rather than a Library initiative. LC2.0 builds on this vision of the Commons by literally knocking down walls of the Library to unify Commons and University objectives.

Phase 1 goals concentrated on the needs of undergraduates and, specifically, on supporting the objectives of UConn’s general education objectives. LC2.0 encompasses those goals as well as a broader vision of the University as an institution deeply committed to hosting a diverse global environment. Students in a Global Learning Commons will come to work, study, relax, eat, and interact in an environment that recognizes that students have individual learning goals (to master a subject/discipline) but that they are also members of a dynamic community.
Learning Commons 2.0—the Global Commons—might include:

**Babbidge Library, University of Connecticut at Storrs**
- An expanded Bookworms Café
- Increased access between Level 1 Learning Commons and Plaza Level locations (Auriemma Room, study areas, iDesk, galleries, etc.) (addition of access point/stairway between floors)
- Expansion onto existing Plaza (gardens, tables, café) extending to Dodd Research Center
- Creation of additional technology-enhanced group work areas and rooms for student work/study
- Creation of Language and Culture room/area that would have space for multimedia presentations, speakers, gallery display, tutoring and study
- Increased tutoring staff and hours
- Effective environmental design that incorporates the theme of being a global citizen

**Regional Campuses**
- Creation of dedicated Learning Commons @ UConn spaces at each campus with appropriate campus-specific resources

Goals of the Global Learning Commons would be to:
- Effectively integrate with the services and resources of Learning Commons 1.0 on Level One of the Babbidge Library.
- Foster an environment that supports co-curricular academic activities that promote global learning.
- Provide academic support and study space in which all of our undergraduate students feel comfortable and free to interact, regardless of country of origin.
- Promote language study, intercultural communication skills and provide academic opportunities for interaction between domestic and international students.
- Develop student academic knowledge, skills, and cultural competence to become engaged global citizens.

**A Serious Commitment—and a Worthwhile One**
Learning Commons 2.0 will require significant investment of both time and resources from across the University of Connecticut. To be successful, this initiative would need to be fully funded and supported at the highest level of administration. LC2.0 hopes to literally change the landscape of the University of Connecticut in a way that reflects the University’s vision of itself as we continue into a new century. Even the best institutions of higher education such as the University of Connecticut have become laden with a multitude of services that overwhelm in number and range. Learning Commons 2.0 is a move toward making the process of a learning a unifying one.
Learning Commons Project Team

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