

Chapter 21

If You Build It Will They Come?

The Learning Commons Engages Students Out of Class

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ABSTRACT

The notion of the learning commons has become the benchmark for service delivery in academic libraries. Current best practices inform the broadening of library services by building relationships with campus academic support units to create a synergistic combination that redefines the research experience of our students by meeting them where they are. This concept expands the boundaries of the traditional library and calls for a reconfiguration of spaces, resources and services focused on supporting the learning needs of the community. The commons becomes a catalyst for new learning and interaction opportunities for students. This chapter will detail the process the University of Maryland underwent to establish this culture of inclusion and innovation in the Terrapin Learning Commons (TLC) which began as an empty new floor of the McKeldin Library (the undergraduate library) in 2010 and has since expanded to become a hub of activity surrounding learning spaces, programming, and a host of cutting edge technological services and resources.

INTRODUCTION

The usage and effectiveness of non-classroom based learning spaces is at the forefront of national conversations relating to higher education, as collections decrease in size, making way for large areas that usually get converted to collaborative or individualized spaces for students. Given these trends, the question becomes just how do these spaces affect student engagement and what accounts for their increasing popularity? The model of the commons provide a natural extension for these activities by their very existence as open, equitable locations where students can socialize, study, and engage with tools and technologies that are not necessarily available in their classrooms. In addition, they might interact with their peers and other library staff in a completely different manner than previously expected due to the way in which these environments are constructed and organized. For example, coming in for a peer

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tutoring session or utilizing the 3D printer levels the playing field so that students are not always relying on a formalized expert figure (read faculty) to provide them with answers, but they are now taking control of their own learning and possibly creating new and better ways to contribute and develop an entirely new set of experiences, products and relationships.

This chapter will detail the history and experiences of the Terrapin Learning Commons (TLC) at the University of Maryland (UMD) in the areas of learning spaces, workshops/events, technology, and partnerships in promoting and supporting a sense of comradery, collaboration and fun for students as part of their academic experience at the university.

BACKGROUND

Student engagement, retention and success continue to be important issues that are making waves in the ongoing debate regarding the connections between library usage and student achievement. Libraries and learning commons therefore play an important role in defining how they contribute to these various elements. Fredricks et.al (2004) focus on three areas of engagement: behavioral, emotional and cognitive which chart how students interact with their academic environment; everything from attending class to feeling a sense of belonging and preparing for their careers. Coates (2007) defines engagement as something that encompasses both academic as well as non-academic experiences. But there appears to be a scarcity of information which answers such questions as engaging with what and for what purpose? Zepke et.al (2010) lay out strategies for engagement which have far reaching implications and help define these rather abstract questions. They list several actionable areas to improve student engagement, such as enabling students to work autonomously, building learning relationships that are collaborative, enabling them to participate as active citizens, and investing in strong support services (2010). This perspective helps to cement the concept that a learning commons brings these parts together under one cohesive model of collaboration, innovation, support and participation which are the cornerstones of engagement.

But how are these learning commons different from other spaces and social episodes in making the student experience a meaningful one? Crafting a definition of a learning commons takes into account not only its spaces, but the community building, sense of ownership and facilitation for innovation that occurs within them. Bennet (2008) makes the distinction that while an information commons supports the institutional mission, the learning commons enacts it. He continues by stating that “the key...is to replace our typical question about what should be in a space with the less typical question of what happens in a space” (p. 2). That is exactly the question the TLC was attempting to answer. UMD was in a unique situation because the space was built before anything else, and the challenge became how to provide a context for defining the types of activities and services occurring within it while respecting the physical and organizational structures which contained this initial framework.

In his often cited work, Beagle (1999) asserts that the commons create an environment which runs across divisions and units. In other words, there is something different, perhaps special, about the commons environment which cannot be replicated or achieved elsewhere. Steiner and Holley (2009) open with a declarative statement that a crucial element of the commons is that they are catalysts for change. They support this assertion with one that defines the need for a commons because of its ability to support new and collaborative styles of teaching and learning. They also appear dismissive of the argument that the library is simply a glorified student union, and instead focus on the intersection between learning, technology and services. This is the power of student engagement at its finest, and this is how and why

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