NEW CHALK TALK

LEARNING COMMONS: Enhancing student learning & scholarship*

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Let me take the opportunity to join Dr Aziza Ellozy in welcoming back all colleagues and concur with her that this is an exceptionally exciting academic year as it involves much more than our move to the new campus. This is particularly so in the general area of student learning and scholarship as the Library and Learning Technologies (LLT) School has taken on the challenge of introducing a **Learning Commons** service area in our new Library building at the new campus. What is that, you might ask, and how can a space in a building relate to enhancing student learning and scholarship? Well as you did ask, let me elaborate.

Let me first make it absolutely clear as to what it is not. **It is not** a new name for the conventional library reference area that is invariably found in all main libraries and usually occupies the main service area of the library. Neither is it a conventional reference area with some additional new furniture and possibly some workstation clusters for student use. What is it then?

As Joan Lippincott (Lippincott, 2006), explains this a dedicated and carefully designed space within a University library whose primary objective is to support and enhance *the mission of the institution* and in particular with regard to student learning and scholarship. Thus, we can confirm immediately that the *AUC Learning Commons* will be a **unique space**, as is the case in most other institutions, which specifically addresses and supports the AUC mission of a liberal arts college intending to become a world class university. In other words, and although we will learn from other institutions that have developed effective spaces such as this, the bottom line is that we have to design our own in order to address our own unique mission statement. This is a new and very exciting challenge that needs to be designed and implemented as a collaborative effort between LLT staff, faculty, students and University administrators in order for it to both exemplify and support the evolving AUC mission itself.

Having noted what it is not and the fact that there is no blueprint of a successful example for us to use, let us consider what is involved and what will be required for us to meet this new challenge. Dan Gjelten, librarian at St Thomas University, presents a very succinct account which deserves to be noted:

I see that one rationale for the Commons is to 'get students to the library'. In our case, it has been very effective in attracting students…But that begs the question…once they are in the building, what do we do with them? How do we engage them? The rationale for the learning commons… [is how] it will enhance student learning and scholarship. That is the real challenge, and the real goal of the learning commons. (quoted in Lippincott, 2006: 7.1-7.2)

Thus, it is clear from the start that the Learning Commons we envisage is a significant departure from a conventional reference service area as it has as a primary goal "the active engagement of students" for the purpose of enhancing their capacity to learn and improve their respective scholarship. This requires specific and targeted design and activities that will enable it to happen. Let us consider briefly a couple of key areas highlighted by Joan Lippincott in her seminal account on the nature of a Learning Commons:

Technology & relevant user services: conventionally when libraries provide computer facilities they see them as providing the opportunity for students to retrieve electronic information which they will then use to produce assignments. In a Learning Commons we need to be able to provide both the hardware and the software that *"provide users with a seamless work environment so that they may access, manage and produce information all at the same workstation."* (Lippincott, 2006: 7.2) This, of

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course, implies that the both the hardware and software provided is much more extensive than what is available in conventional libraries, but so is the support for students to use it. Thus, we depart from the conventional library where learned reference librarians epitomize the highest and only level of skill available to users. Instead we need alongside them, staff that can also provide support in such areas as IT, multimedia production, statistical packages, editing capabilities, geographical information systems, presentation skills, etc. In other words all the skills available within LLT working in close collaboration to support the students. Thus, the *reference desk*, which will continue to play a vital role, has to be matched as well by a *services and information desk* in an active Learning Commons. In fact it could be argued that the skills available at such a desk or space go even beyond what LLT can offer. For example, students may also need help from the Writing Program, as they work on assignments, and other skills such as presentation skills, as they prepare to make a multimedia presentation in class and need somewhere to practice. If possible such services should also be provided within the Learning Commons.

Group Working Spaces: traditionally libraries focus on "*quiet spaces*" with a few rooms dedicated to group work. Learning Commons have the opposite objective and should provide a **"variety"** of spaces where students can work collaboratively and also combine social interaction, relaxation, reading media and academic work. Thus, furnishings MUST take into account all these dimensions and provide everything from dedicated rooms for collaborative work to soft furnishings and refreshments for social interaction. This will enable students to work collaboratively on projects and consider spending "time" in the Learning Commons. These are also areas where professors can arrange to meet groups of students in order to explore certain issues which may also require the use of sophisticated electronic resources, information and/or hardware.

Combining academic work with social activities: conventional libraries see themselves primarily as the key source of academic resources for the university community which they serve. Social activities and/or interaction is seen as taking place in other spaces and provided by others within the university community. Learning Commons aim to combine the two, as much as they can, and thus provide our modern day students with a seamless environment where they can move from social to work and back again with great ease. Our students are of a generation which "multitasks" and drifts between social, leisure and work with great ease. To attract them, keep them and engage them the Learning Commons also needs to provide a similar environment to the extent that it is possible. Thus, spaces within the Learning Commons where students can listen to music, watch a DVD, see a short live performance or listen to an invited speaker, in between working on assignments, recreates the seamless social-work environment they seek.

To achieve the above will require considerable planning and involvement from all sectors of the University. LLT may well lead on this, but will require the active support of all other sectors in order to be able to address what is both needed and appropriate for AUC as such. The challenge is most exciting and is in fact a major new departure and innovation not just for LLT, but for the University as a whole. If we manage to do so then we can see ourselves

Walking into a busy commons on a weekday evening,[and] see groups of students clustered around computers, some chatting, others talking on cell phones, some with headphones listening to audio while they work on computers, and some working on their own, perhaps on a laptop, with coffee and snacks, books and notebooks spread out on a table. It would be difficult to tell, without peering over their shoulders, exactly what types of activities the students were engaged in, particularly whether they're recreational or academic. Are they playing computer games? Buying things on the Internet? Sending and receiving instant messages? Or are they involved in more scholarly pursuits, such as accessing journals licensed by the library, using art image collections, writing papers, editing videos for course projects, or accessing assignments through a course management system? The students probably are doing some of each. (Lippincott, 2006: 7.5)

Sources:

▪ Joan K Lippincott, (2006) *Linking the Information Commons to Learning*, in **Learning Spaces**, edited by Diana Goblinger, EDUCAUSE, pp 7.1 – 7.18