The UNF Library Learning Commons Project Proposal

by

Dee Baldwin, Interim Dean of Library
Lisandra R. Carmichael, Director of Public Services

November 4, 2013

The UNF Library Learning Commons Defined

A selected literature review on academic library learning commons revealed that there is no universal definition of “learning commons”. Nevertheless, all learning commons are composed of a similar set of elements: learners, spaces, and technologies. After much thought, the definition that best describes the future UNF Library learning commons, as we envision it, was provided by EDUCAUSE. “The modern commons is a meeting place, typically offering at least one area where students can rearrange furniture to accommodate impromptu planning sessions or secure a quiet place to work near a window. In response to course assignments, which have taken a creative and often collaborative turn in the past two decades, the learning commons provides areas for group meetings, tools to support creative efforts, and on-staff specialists to provide help as needed. And yet the successful learning commons does not depend solely upon adaptable space configuration or the latest technological gear. Its strength lies in the relationships it supports, whether these are student-to-student, student-to-faculty, student-to-staff, student-to-equipment, or student-to-information. Effective learning commons are alive with the voices of students working together, establishing the kinds of connections that promote active, engaged learning” (EDUCAUSE, 2011).

Drivers for the UNF Library Learning Commons

The Thomas G. Carpenter Library received over 750,000 visitors last year! This statistic shows that the UNF Library is an integral part of the campus community, especially of undergraduate students. “Since much of the learning in higher education institutions takes place outside the classroom, libraries can be one important venue for such learning” (Lippincott, 2005, p. 13.1). Technology has changed how library patrons seek information and academic libraries have responded by changing service models and providing more library spaces that support the ubiquitous use of technology and support collaborative learning experiences. The drivers for developing a learning commons at the UNF Library include:

- New technologies impact the way students and the faculty interact with the library and its resources.
- Students, primarily Millennials - the majority of UNF students, are constantly innovating and accessing content with new, different mobile devices from a plethora of resources, including the library’s e-books and electronic databases, and they expect the library to provide just-in-time services.
- Academic libraries are shifting their primary functions from storage and physical collection repositories to repurposed, dynamic spaces in response to students’ demands for more group study space, use of mobile devices, increased online courses, need for proof-reading help and class presentation support, while simultaneously demanding quiet study retreats.
- Academic libraries are a recruitment tool for universities when students and their parents are deciding which university to attend.
- Academic libraries provide powerful environments for learning, increased student engagement, and social exchanges.
• Infrastructure upgrades such as electricity, lighting, signage, data ports, wireless connectivity, etc., are needed as the library continues to transition to electronic access of information.

The UNF Library seeks to keep pace with other academic libraries in Florida and across the nation by developing a library learning commons that fosters student learning and engagement through a suite of services, technologies and study spaces. Our goal is to create a student-centric environment that fosters critical thinking, cultural growth, and collaboration.

**Potential University Partners with the UNF Library**

Since not all library learning commons are similar, its partners are not the same. Yet, the early identification and participation of university partners in the learning commons is critical for its success. An emergent theme from the Library and Information Science literature was the need to create a unified vision of the learning commons which is accepted by all the contributing members. McMullen states “a clearly articulated vision, a philosophy of service, and a charter plan that incorporates cross-campus constituencies and puts student learning at its focus are essential to the success of the learning commons model” (2008, p. 1). In a recent Carpenter Library learning commons visioning focus group, representatives from Information Technology Services, the Center for Instruction & Research Technology, the Graduate School, the Office of Undergraduate Studies, graduate and undergraduate students, and vendors met with a select group of librarians to develop a collaborative vision, focus the scope of the learning commons, and determine how best to include the faculty, staff, and students in the project. At a future date, external stakeholders such as Jacksonville community partners may be included in the conversations. The next steps include continued conversations with university partners and to begin conducting user needs assessments. This project is intended to be forward thinking and to reach not only the students who physically visit the library, but also distance learners who choose or need to collaborate with their peers, professors, librarians, and others online via videoconferencing, Skype, Google Hangouts, and other means.

**The UNF Library Learning Commons in Support of a Key Metric - Graduation Rates (4)**

In 2005, 46 institutions of higher learning participated in a survey conducted by the Association of Physical Plant Administrators’ Center for Facilities Research. One of the three purposes of the survey was to determine the relative importance of various facilities in deciding which college or university prospective students would attend. Fifty three point six percent of the 6,153 respondents indicated that the library was extremely important or very important in their decision to attend that institution; only facilities for students’ majors rated higher (Cain & Reynolds, 2006). The same survey found that 48.4% of respondents felt the library was an important facility to see during a visit to a prospective university; the only facilities that rated higher were the facilities in the students’ majors and the residence halls on campus (Cain & Reynolds, 2006).

According to Steven Bell, “there is ample research to show that factors such as student engagement with staff, achieving academic success, being challenged academically, having good out-of-class educational experiences and having a support network all contribute to student retention. The academic library can play a role in supporting all these activities” (2008, p.4). The library learning commons provides the perfect setting for these activities. “Strategies for increasing retention, and ultimately graduation rates, center on helping students engage with other students and educators (Bell, 2008, p. 2). According to Bell, “this includes…developing out-of-classroom learning experiences and improving teaching quality. These strategies focus on people—not physical resources” (2008, p. 2). “Additional strategies include “high-impact educational practices” such as first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive...
courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning/community based learning, internships, capstone courses and projects (Kuh, High-Impact Educational Practices 2008, 9-11, as cited in ACRL, 2010). The Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL) Value of Academic Libraries Report states “retention and graduation rates are currently among the most discussed foci of institutional missions” (ACRL, 2010, p. 32). Additionally, the report indicates that “libraries support students’ ability to do well in internships, secure job placements, earn salaries, gain acceptance to graduate/professional schools, and obtain marketable skills (ACRL, 2010, p. 14).

An expected outcome of the library learning commons is that it will help recruit, retain, and graduate students. The library learning commons will:

- Be an inviting, modern space where students and the faculty actively engage in learning and teaching; and which will be included as a highlight in university tours to prospective students and their parents.
- Retain students by providing them with a learning environment for course related interactions outside of the classroom where they can seek the assistance of experts in information, technology, writing papers, preparing presentations, and creating media. The library commons will be a one-stop-shop for students.
- Be highly thought of and sought after by current students. Graduated, successful students will bring recognition and gain notoriety for the university in the local community.

These outcomes will be measured by interviews, surveys, observations, and focus groups with current and graduated students.

The UNF Library Learning Commons in Support of another Key Metric - Academic Progress Rate (5)

Lippincott states that employers expect students to have a “certain degree of sophistication with technology” and that graduates may have an edge on the market “if they can demonstrate to employers that they have created serious academic work that is enhanced through digital content and technologies” (Lippincott, 2012, p. 546). Group study rooms equipped with computers, projectors, smartboards, video editing equipment, and videoconferencing capabilities can enhance the student experience outside the classroom.

An expected outcome is that the learning commons will provide vital resources and services for student learning needs which will support and encourage academic progress. The library learning commons will:

- Provide students with the resources they need to better complete their assignments, perform better in their classes, and improve their grade point averages.
- Engage student participation in academic pursuits outside the classroom in collaborative team settings that encourage project and assignment completion and success.
- Afford opportunities for social interactions to enhance the learning process through collaborative learning, research instruction, tutoring centers, and other services.

These outcomes will be measured by interviews, surveys, observations, and focus groups with current students, the faculty, librarians, and other partners of the library learning commons.

A Brief Background on Current Challenges for Developing a UNF Library Learning Commons

The Thomas G. Carpenter Library opened on October 1, 1980 and although the building was remodeled in 2005 to accommodate the growing number of students, the infrastructure in the “old” part of the building was not updated; for example, the electricity and data ports do not meet current and projected
student and faculty use. The student-centric learning commons would be located primarily on the first and second floors of the library. These floors need to be renovated to make way for office spaces, study rooms, presentation rooms, media studios, technology, and furniture. There are not enough study rooms to meet the demands of the students. During Oct 16 – 24, 2013, 728 student requests for study rooms went unfilled because of lack of study rooms at the library. The current furniture dates to the 80s and cannot be easily moved around by the students. The current wireless access points do not meet the computing demands of students. The electrical infrastructure needs to be updated as well. While none of these challenges are insurmountable, they need to be addressed as part of a holistic view of the scope of this project.

To see what the Library could do when faced with the challenges, we had a visioning meeting on October 30, 2013, where we invited key stakeholders to share with the library their ideas of what the Learning Commons should be. Our partners were from all areas of the University including our students. From this visioning session we came up with high level attributes that express what the Learning Commons should encompass.

- Flexible Spaces – defined as high impact/low cost movable pieces that are reconfigurable by students. Hoteling of services in spaces that take advantage of open rooms. The furnishings are adjustable and ADA compliant.
- Accessibility – defined as support for mobile devices and technologies such as device checkout, screen sharing devices, and devices that access information. Additionally, that we meet the needs of the virtual/distance users.
- Integrated delivery of services - This includes shared service desks among Library, ITS, ACE, etc. The services support kiosks, equipment sharing, group presentations areas, recording areas, and the integration of virtual users through technologies.

Conclusion

ACRLs’ Standards for Libraries in Higher Education lists nine principles libraries should follow. One of those principles is space: “libraries are the intellectual commons where users interact with ideas in both physical and virtual environments to expand learning and facilitate the creation of new knowledge” (ACRL, 2011). The most effective way for libraries to follow this principle is via the learning commons. “The commons invites students to devise their own approaches to their work and to transfer what they learn in one course to the work they do for another. A well-equipped learning commons says to a student, “Here you have tools, room to collaborate, equipment, advice, research options, and access to expert information. Now it is up to you to build something worthwhile: a paper, a presentation, an education” (EDUCAUSE, 2011).

References


