



## Editorial:

# The Information or the Learning Commons: Which Will We Have?<sup>1</sup>

by Scott Bennett

Who would today build or renovate an academic library without including an information commons? As Charles Forrest tells us, “in the last decade information commons have made a sudden, dramatic, and widespread appearance in academic and research libraries across the country and around the world.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the information commons has in many ways come to substitute for the card catalog as a principal means of defining space as library space.

At the same time, we have exhibited considerable uncertainty about what to call these spaces. The information commons and learning commons are by far the most common names, but the words *academic*, *collaboration*, *teaching*, *technology*, and *media* often appear in names, along with or in the place of *information* and *learning*.<sup>3</sup> Curiously, the word *service* is not used even though librarians think of themselves as service professionals and the convenience of “one-stop” shopping for services is often proclaimed as a principal attraction of the commons.

So what have we actually been building? Donald Beagle provides a helpful way of distinguishing between the information and the learning commons. The former he defines as “a cluster of network access points and associated IT tools situated in the context of physical, digital, human, and social resources organized in support of learning.” The purpose of the information commons is to support learning—a service mission. By contrast, Beagle defines the learning commons as what happens when the resources of the information commons are “organized in collaboration with learning initiatives sponsored by other academic units, or aligned with learning outcomes defined through a cooperative process.”<sup>4</sup> The learning commons, so defined, depends for its success not only on joint action by support/service units (such as the library and academic computing) but also on the involvement of academic units that establish learning goals for the institution. Properly understood,

librarians and academic computing staff cannot alone create a learning commons, as they serve but do not define institutional mission. Other academic units do that and must join librarians and technologists in creating a learning commons. The fundamental difference between the information and the learning commons is that the former supports institutional mission while the latter enacts it.

How does one move from supporting to enacting institutional mission, from the support of learning to learning itself? Good counsel is available from Jeanne Narum, Director of Project Kaleidoscope, who observes that “too often, planning for new spaces ... begins with the wrong questions”—questions about what and how much will go in the space. Such questions usually yield answers relating to things (books and computers, for instance) and services (help with reference questions and the use of technology in the case of the information commons). Narum understands the importance of these questions but argues that “when they shape the initial stages of planning, the process is skewed. You will not end up with the building that you need, that your students deserve.” The right first questions focus instead “on student learning—*what actually is to happen* in the classroom and lab” and, one may add, in the learning commons.<sup>5</sup> The key, then, is to replace our typical first question about what should *be* in a space with the less typical question, what should *happen* in the space.

This is a profoundly important difference, as even a brief assessment of information and learning commons using Beagle’s definitions shows.

It is of course relatively easy to create the “network access points and associated IT tools” characteristic of the commons, but the needed “human resources” are somewhat harder to marshal. A survey of such facilities indicated they are staffed with librarians in 88 percent of cases and information technology staff in 71 percent of cases—suggesting a significant difference in access to these two kinds of information service providers. The available evidence about cross training and collaboration among service providers is not positive. Asked whether cross training among those with different professional backgrounds was necessary to the success of the commons, 82

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percent of survey respondents answered “yes.” Yet library staff got such cross training in only 73 percent of the cases, compared to a modest 41 percent for information technology staff. This suggests a lopsided, though not a completely one-way collaboration. When asked what degree of collaboration between staff with different professional backgrounds was necessary to ensure the success of the commons, only 14 percent of survey respondents answered “full.” The remaining 86 percent reported success built on only “substantial” (55 percent), “moderate” (27 percent), or “minimal” (4 percent) collaboration.<sup>6</sup>

Turning to collaboration with other academic units focused on learning outcomes, student success, and other issues of institutional mission—considerations critical to a learning commons—the picture is mixed. On the positive side is the fact that student tutoring and faculty development staff are included in commons in 59 percent and 25 percent of cases, respectively. But these staff appeared to be somewhat isolated within the commons, as they were involved in cross training in only 32 percent and 11 percent of cases, respectively.<sup>7</sup> More telling is survey data from 122 of the library directors who attended the information literacy workshops sponsored in 2004 and 2005–2006 by the Council of Independent Colleges and the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education (NITLE).<sup>8</sup> While an impressive 93 percent of these library directors described their institutions as encouraging a campus-wide climate of collaboration, that encouragement had limited impact on collaboration among curricula designers, faculty, librarians, academic advisors, and computing staff—which the library directors reported as existing on only 59 percent of their campuses.<sup>9</sup> Collaboration among faculty, librarians, and other academic support staff has long been understood to be a key factor in successful information literacy programs<sup>10</sup> and is the distinguishing factor in Beagle’s definition of the learning commons.

These data suggest that we have a long way to go if we mean to build learning commons, as Beagle defines them—if we mean to get beyond the support of learning that defines the information commons. How will we know we have succeeded in building learning commons? Beagle’s answer to this question lies with the deep involvement of *academic* units in their design and operation, units that do not simply support but enact the education mission of the college or university. Another, closely related answer springs from how we answer the first question of what we intend to happen in the learning commons. If we design the commons primarily with the intention that good service will happen there,<sup>11</sup> we will surely succeed in that goal. That we will get student learning as well is a too-easily made assumption that parallels the now discredited assumption that learning is the result of good lectures.<sup>12</sup> If, alternatively, we work with academic units and officers across the campus to design the commons primarily with the intention that learning will happen there, we are much more likely to see that magical moment when students, building on work begun in the classroom, take responsibility for and control over their own learning. This is the crucial event that makes the library and its learning commons “the last bulwarks of a culture of acculturation. They are places where you learn, and in learning, become part of a larger world.”<sup>13</sup>

So what is in a name, after all? The difference between an information and a learning commons is one of aspiration. Being clear about this is much more than a semantic exercise. It involves, rather, focusing clearly on the right first questions in space design and committing resolutely to a collaborative effort to design a space that is deeply responsive to an institutional mission. These

are hard things to do, but aiming at anything less will produce a commons that, while almost surely useful, will likely fall short of what our institutions need and our students deserve.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. ©Scott Bennett, 2007. Readers of this paper and librarians may copy it without the copyright owner’s permission if the author and publisher are acknowledged in the copy and the copy is used for educational, not-for-profit purposes.
2. Charles Forrest and Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, “Beyond Classroom Construction and Design: Formulating a Vision for Learning Spaces in Libraries,” *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, 44:4 (Summer 2005): 296.
3. Information from responses to a survey conducted by the author of libraries identified as having information commons; for more information see Scott Bennett, “Designing for Uncertainty: Three Approaches,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 33:1 (Jan 2007): 165–179.
4. Donald Robert Beagle, with Donald Russell and Bailey Barbara Tierney, *The Information Commons Handbook* (New York: Neal Schuman, 2006), p. xviii.
5. Jeanne Narum, “Building Communities: Asking the Right Questions,” Project Kaleidoscope (2002), emphasis added. Available: <http://www.pkal.org/documents/BuildingCommunitiesAskingTheRightQuestions.cfm> (25 September 2007). Narum provides an excellent general review of sources on the design of learning spaces in “Transforming the Physical Environment for Learning,” *Change*, 36:5 (Sept/Oct 2004): 62–66. This issue of *Change* includes several other articles discussing aspects of current teaching and learning practices and their intersection with technology.
6. All the data reported in this paragraph are from “Designing for Uncertainty,” pp. 167–168.
7. *Ibid.* I focus here only on librarians and information technology staff, although student tutoring and AV/media staff and other student services and faculty development staff also work in information commons in a varying but sometimes significant number of cases.
8. For an account of these survey data, see Scott Bennett, “Campus Cultures Fostering Information Literacy,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 7:2 (Apr 2007): 147–167.
9. These data were gathered before the workshops. The same two questions about collaboration were asked in a follow-up survey about a year after each workshop. At that time, the same responding library directors characterized their campuses as encouraging collaboration much less frequently (68 percent, down from 93 percent), while the frequency of collaboration among faculty, librarians, etc. remained unchanged at 59 percent. One might speculate that the dramatically lower figure for campus-wide collaboration reported a year after the workshops reflects the way the workshops sensitized participants to this issue and set a high standard for collaborative achievement.
10. See, for instance, the excellent collection of essays edited by Dick Raspa and Dane Ward, *The Collaborative Imperative: Librarians and Faculty Working Together in the Information Universe* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000). These authors’ initial essay, “Listening for Collaboration: Faculty and Librarians Working Together,” pp. 1–18, is especially worth reading. The professional literature on information literacy is voluminous; an excellent point of entry is the Web site maintained by the Association of College and Research Libraries, “ACRL Information Literacy.” Available: <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlissues/acrlinfolit/informationliteracy.htm> (25 September 2007).
11. As was the case, for instance, with both the Learning Commons in the Undergraduate Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the Academic Commons at Oberlin College. The former is described as “implementing a new service model,” while at the latter, a new central service desk is “a focal point for all

services provided by the Commons” where “better coordinated information, research, technology, and learning support” will be available. See the Fall 2006 issue of *Friendscript*, the newsletter of the University of Illinois Library at Urbana-Champaign; and the Spring 2007 issue of *Library Perspectives, A Newsletter of the Oberlin College Library*.

12. See for instance the widely cited article by Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, “From Teaching to Learning-A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education,” *Change*, 27:6 (Nov/Dec 1995): 12–25.
13. Aaron Betsky, “Dark Clouds of Knowledge [A Description of the New University of Utrecht Library],” *Architecture* 94:4 (Apr 25): 52.