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Learning Centers, Libraries, and IT: Providing Integrated Support Services in a Learning Commons

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Overview

Seven years ago, when two of the three authors were newcomers to the Colorado College campus, we began our collaborative work with visits to each academic department. We used these visits not only to introduce ourselves but also to signal that we were in the business of providing service in an integrated way and that we wanted to understand faculty needs by meeting with them on their home turf. Two years ago, the spirit and energy of our collaborations yielded a new, experimental Learning Commons space in our library. We also initiated a meeting series among key staff members from our respective areas of responsibility in a group we have labeled Integrated Learning Support Services (ILSS). The Learning Commons and ILSS group are serving as a test bed and a brain trust, respectively, for ongoing design work for a new library. In this research bulletin, we provide an overview of 1) the process and product of building The Learning Commons, 2) successes and challenges of our work together, and 3) some quantitative and qualitative benefits of our work for the campus.

Highlights of Integrated Support Services in a Learning Commons

Colorado College is a small, private, residential liberal arts college located on a 90-acre campus in downtown Colorado Springs, on the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains and at the foot of Pikes Peak. The college operates an innovative, one-course-at-a-time format known as the Block Plan. We believe that this approach, along with small classes and the depth of inquiry fostered by long classes and field study, create the most effective contexts for learning.

Learning Commons Concept

Conceptual thinking about a Learning Commons evolved over six years and started with a report in 1999 from a campus committee comprising both faculty and administrators. The committee was charged to make recommendations that would support and increase student success at the college. Among the most telling recommendations was one that we should centralize student support services, enhancing an already strong but small writing-center operation that employed a director, some half-time professional tutors, and a cadre of trained student consultants. The committee recognized, for example, that we had no organized and coherent support in the quantitative areas of the curriculum where a large number of students encountered challenges. This report provided the needed impetus for the campus to establish coordinated and comprehensive support for student learning.

During the year that followed the publication of the student success report, the president and the dean of the college charged a faculty member to conduct an online investigation of how other colleges and universities supported learning and teaching for students. She discovered a variety of models. And then, a year after that, an ad hoc Student Learning Center Committee that included key faculty, some administrators, students, and a staff representative began exploring what such a comprehensive system might look like for

Colorado College, in terms of both services and physical space. A crucial step in this process was a visit by the committee to several similar colleges—ones identified as potential models for us through the online study. One model was particularly attractive in that it was located in that college's main library and included a faculty teaching center and supportive resources for quantitative reasoning. At that campus, the writing support program was extensive, so it was located elsewhere on campus. An especially important insight from the visits was that two very different centers, one for students and one for faculty and each reporting to different administrative leaders and with independent budgets, could co-habit one central space. Moreover, the joint operation was situated in a *library*—a natural center of learning for students *and* faculty. A vision for The Learning Commons at the Colorado College Tutt Library was forming.

Listening, Planning, and Serendipity

At first it was not clear where the Colorado College campus could locate a center that combined student and faculty support services. The Crown Faculty Center, established in 1996, was already housed in Tutt Library. As with most college libraries, space was at a premium, and that was no exception for our library, which was built in the 1960s and then added on to in the mid-1980s. What services might be brought together for students, and where would a student center locate itself on our campus? Would it have to be separate from the faculty center? The Student Learning Center Committee set out to find a solution.

Over several months, lunch discussions with the committee and various faculty members, students, and administrators yielded no easy solution. At about the same time, the college received a generous gift from a foundation that included \$350,000 earmarked as seed money to establish a centralized student support center. The college had pledged to match that amount. Happily, a family whose daughter graduated from the college had designated a major gift to endow a Quantitative Reasoning Center including a full-time director and some operating expenses. The potential for a central student learning center was in place, but two substantial challenges remained. First, and before we could engage in architectural design, we needed to do the program planning with the key stakeholders in the commons—a determination of the learning services to be provided, associated needs for physical space, and the proximity and adjacencies of the various services. Second, and even more difficult, we needed to identify a central location for a comprehensive center that could house student and faculty learning services.

To address these challenges, the college was very fortunate to have the services of a professional space planner who had been hired as a consultant for our Facilities Services department. Having access to this person was crucial to moving the vision forward. The consultant spent several months interviewing leaders of potential services that might occupy an ideal combined center. From this information, he created bubble diagrams of groups that should be adjacent in such a center and started computing the amount of physical space required for offices and the informal study spaces that would also be necessary.

In January 2003, the consultant and members of the committee invited library and IT staff to a presentation on the plans and space program for the student learning center. At that time, various locations around campus were being considered, from the basement of a dormitory to a new free-standing house. While the librarians were excited by the basic concept of a student learning center, they felt strongly that a key element of student learning support had been left out—namely, the library and librarians. The library was the home of the raw materials for scholarship—scholarly journals, data, maps, videos, primary source collections, and electronic databases—and the librarians were actively engaged in course-integrated library instruction and one-on-one work with students.

The librarians also had some very practical concerns. They already had difficulty referring students across campus to the existing Writing Center: students did not want to walk across campus at night for these services. Librarians also had security concerns about another, less populated, late-night venue. Some of the amenities proposed for the new center—a coffee shop, group study areas, a copy center—were amenities students also wanted in the library. The library was bursting at the seams, but the librarians said this new center belonged in the library. Staff from IT also had concerns that the vision for the new student learning center included significant technology components, but IT had not been included in the planning and the plan did not include either life cycle replacement or staffing for the technology. No one was very happy at the end of that meeting.

Distress, however, sometimes leads to a solution, and in this case, just about one month after the meeting, Carol Dickerson asked Paul Kuerbis to consider the possibility of moving the government documents collection into high-density storage as part of the project, freeing space within the library for the new center. A feasibility study revealed that we could make this work if some of the original space elements for the Colket Student Learning Center (<http://www.coloradocollege.edu/learningcommons/academicsupport/>) were scaled back.

So, as a result of careful listening and space-planning work by our consultant, as well as some creative, institutional thinking by our library staff, the Learning Commons vision was ready to become a reality. When the president was briefed on the project, he became convinced that tripling the original gift to approximately \$1 million would not only serve the immediate needs of students and faculty but could provide a test bed for how a new library might be configured in the future. We were ready to move on to planning the details.

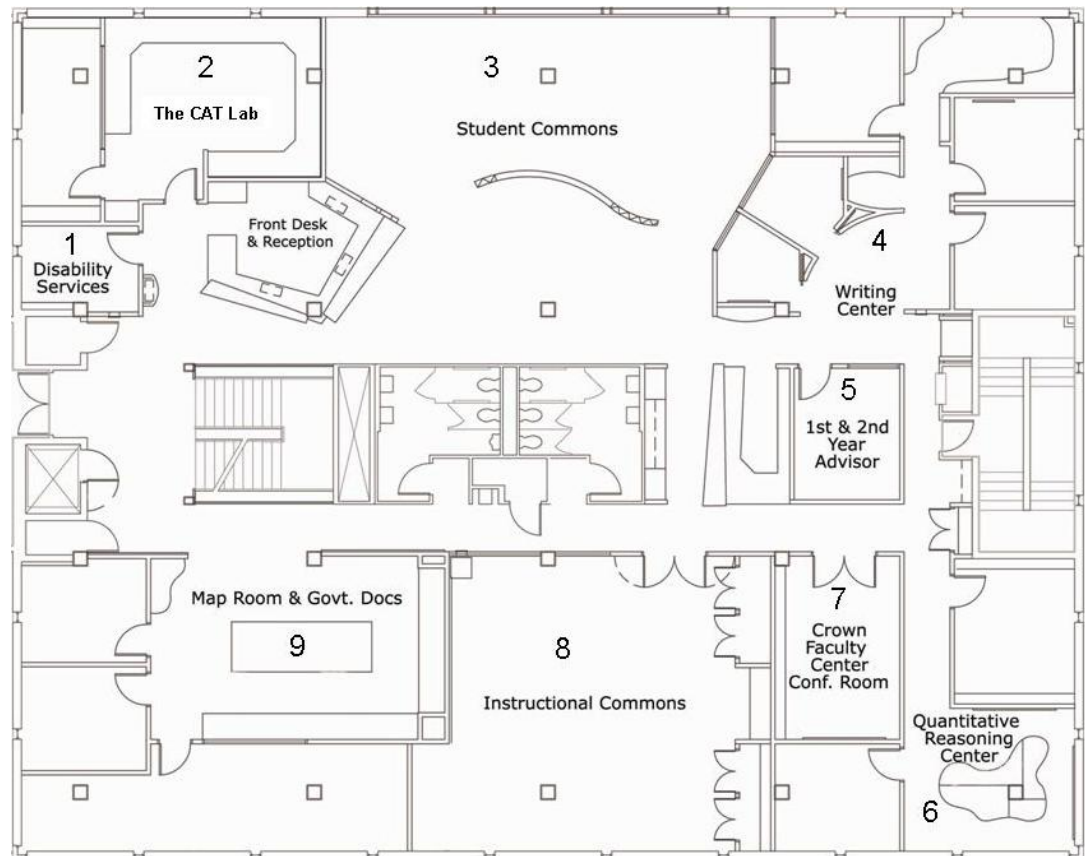
A Learning Commons Planning Committee was formed that included representatives from the library, the Writing Center, the faculty center, and both the network and systems group and the academic technology group. Part of the challenge was to create The Learning Commons without decreasing the study seating available in the library building, which was already in short supply. What emerged from this process was an exciting concept for a space with a broad range of student learning and faculty development services, flexible spaces for study and group work, an advanced technology lab where existing equipment and services could be brought together, and

proximity to the librarians and collections. A signature element of the concept was the opening of the space to the east with three large floor-to-ceiling windows facing the academic quadrangle. A local architectural firm was engaged to plan the interior spaces, and a design was produced.

Learning Commons Product—Synergy through Proximity

The Learning Commons design brought together the resources for student and faculty learning in one location—the main college library. In doing so, the design communicated to the campus community the importance of learning as a central value, and it enhanced the campus intellectual climate. Figure 1 shows a layout of The Learning Commons. It includes the Crown Faculty Center (a conference room and all-purpose meeting room for seminars, luncheons, and so forth), the Colket Student Learning Center with its Writing and Quantitative Reasoning Centers, Disability Services, the First Year and Second Year Programs Director and Advisor, the Computers and Advanced Technology lab for students and faculty, the map room, and the work spaces for the Government Documents librarian and staff.

Figure 1. Colorado College Learning Commons



The hub is the student commons (3), sometimes affectionately referred to as the “living room.” What is not clear from Figure 1 is that remodeling involved replacing three large concrete “hanging walls” with an expansive window wall that provides users of this area

a peaceful view of the college's quadrangle. This area is furnished with comfortable couches and lounge chairs as well as formal, more traditional library tables. Students have turned this area into a contemplative space—they insist on quiet, and those working in adjacent areas must self-monitor. Other spaces frequented by student study groups are the two spaces normally reserved for faculty use during the daytime hours: the Crown Faculty Conference Room (7) and the Instructional Commons (8).

The Crown Faculty Center (7-8) supports faculty learning through seminars, luncheon talks by faculty colleagues, occasional workshops with outside experts, limited stipends for travel to pedagogically related conferences, a retreat for First Year Experience faculty, support for the current Teagle Foundation assessment work, and other similar initiatives that support student learning through innovative and scholarly teaching.

The Writing Center (4) began more than 25 years ago as a small operation designed to support students who are challenged in different ways by courses that require substantive writing. Because faculty believe writing should be taught in discipline-based courses rather than required composition courses, the center's work has grown over the years as it has found ways to support English as a Second Language (ESL) students including international students, students working on fellowship applications and senior theses, students encountering difficulty in writing, and students in need of special assistance related to a learning difference. The professional staff is complemented by a trained cadre of more than 30 student consultants.

The Quantitative Reasoning (QR) Center's (6) goals are to coordinate extant student tutors in the science departments, establish specialized tutoring in the QR Center, and reach out to other areas of the college, such as sociology, psychology, and economics, that develop quantitative skills. This is the first year with a full-time professional director who balances time working directly with students, mentoring a group of advanced student tutors, engaging students in a tutor training program, and supporting a new effort to work with students enrolled in organic chemistry.

The position of Director of First Year and Second Year Programs and Advising (5) started in 2001. The director coordinates the First Year Experience program that is still going through the inevitable growing pains and has initiated a new effort for sophomores called the Sophomore Jump. The director is also available to supplement advising provided by all faculty.

The Office of Disability Services (1) supports a variety of students who learn differently. The main audience consists of students with documented disabilities that meet the guidelines for learning accommodations provided for in the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). This office also has access to a learning specialist and coordinates support for students with both the Writing Center and the Quantitative Reasoning Center.

The Computers and Advanced Technology lab (2) supports students and faculty wishing to employ the latest in digital techniques for preparing course teaching materials or working on a presentation for an assignment that employs multiple ways of representation. It is open parallel to the library's hours and has a director and a trained staff of student assistants.

Retaining the Map Room (9), staff offices for the Government Documents collection, and a reference librarian within the physical space of The Learning Commons encourages exploration of how to integrate library services with the other functions included in a Learning Commons.

Adjacencies do matter. The synergy obtained by close proximity of support services means that our students are better served. Close communication among such divergent yet similar groups is not easy when separated on a campus. Now, for example, the Quantitative Reasoning director can simply walk to any other nearby office to confer about a student learning difficulty. Moreover, such proximity speaks louder than any words that succeeding at Colorado College is an expectation, and students should begin to take charge of their four years of learning.

Integrated Learning Support Services

While collaboration among the academic technology services group, the library liaisons, and the Crown Faculty Center had been a goal since all three of the authors began their current jobs at the college in 1999, coordination was lacking. Opportunities for joint development of faculty workshops or instructional support were often missed due to separate planning efforts and the time pressures of the Block Plan. Communication and joint project development between the librarians and technology specialists supporting the divisions of the college depended too much on personalities.

Recognizing these challenges and missed opportunities, the three authors initiated a series of meetings during the fall of 2003 that included these three groups plus the Writing Center. A Listserv was created and agendas for the meetings were developed by the leaders of the three areas in consultation with staff. Goals included more effective communication on shared concerns and development of a series of faculty development workshops. As plans for The Learning Commons took physical form, the group also began to talk more about integrating services to students and faculty beyond the delivery of workshops and other special events. Staff members were invited to report back on conferences and on their own projects. Budget priorities for equipment requests were also vetted with the group. Over the next year, the group jointly advocated for and implemented an electronic reserves service and supported investigation of a print management solution for the campus. Once the new Learning Commons space was occupied, we also spent time on policy issues for the space and sharing information about the various services being developed for students.

While everyone seemed to value the improved communication, and we accomplished some of our goals, we felt that the group lacked focus. Meetings often devolved into lengthy discussions of what technical (and printing!) problems we had struggled through in the last block, with little time left to discuss broader issues such as information literacy, assessment, and intellectual property. So, the authors decided to hold a joint retreat in the summer of 2005. This facilitated retreat resulted in the identification of five themes for our work together the following year:

- Solve the campus printing problem.
- Develop a collaborative course support model.
- Improve knowledge among the group of our respective skills to facilitate better referrals and develop partnerships.
- Develop a shared program of professional development.
- Address shared service issues in the building.

It was an ambitious agenda, but within the space of one year, significant progress has been achieved. A print management system has been installed in the library and public labs, and a campus committee has been charged to develop printing policies. Several teams of librarians and Academic Technology Services staff have attended workshops on instructional technology and information literacy themes, and we have collaborated on a Moodle implementation. Among the service improvements in the library building are extended hours until 2:00 a.m., a coffee service, and plans for moving the IT Help Desk to the library. For the current academic year, the ILSS group has chosen two themes for its focus. One is to raise awareness of intellectual property issues on campus, and the second is to work on integrated support for an “emerging scholars” program to develop higher-level research and writing skills beyond the first year.

Results

We have observed three types of results from the creation of The Learning Commons that are worthy of note here: increased utilization of services, the utility of this space as a test bed, and its impact on the climate and “feel” of the library.

Utilization has increased significantly for those services that existed before creation of The Learning Commons. Library front entrance gate count and reference desk questions were up 21 percent and 25 percent, respectively, in the first year of Learning Commons operation. In the Writing Center, general usage was up 27 percent, and first-year-experience sessions were up 47 percent. The Quantitative Reasoning Center and Computers and Advanced Technology lab were new operations, and both experienced high demand for services in their first year—more than 670 and 1,800 visits respectively.

The Learning Commons was created not only to provide a space to deliver the integrated learning support services but also to serve as a test bed for ideas about the kinds of spaces that work best to support student learning and the best ways to deliver these services in a new library. Goals for The Learning Commons component of the new library building have been incorporated into the broad goals for the project in the following language from our programming document:

The new library will provide students and faculty a central location for teaching, learning, and research support in a space that encourages integration of services. Space for the current Learning Commons services (writing center, quantitative reasoning center, faculty development center, disability services, and advising), Academic

Technology Services (to include an advanced technology lab), and IT User Services (Help Desk and A/V Services) should be provided. The librarians' roles as teachers and research consultants should be supported with smart classrooms and consultation spaces.

Finally, The Learning Commons has become a source of pride for the campus and a destination for all campus tours. It has transformed the feel of the library and the academic quad, making them more accessible and comfortable, with a stronger connection between the inside of the library and our beautiful outside environment.

What It Means to Higher Education

The Learning Commons project at Colorado College has, in addition to enhancing and expanding existing services for students and faculty, contributed to our own learning about our organizations and their roles at the college. We learned that:

- We can be more effective thinking of our organizations as a *triad* (rather than several *dyads*) with student learning and success as the “glue” that binds us together and gives us purpose.
- It is both helpful and interesting to work closely with others outside the immediate domain of our professions.
- The Teaching and Learning Center, the library, and IT Services can be highly collaborative without being a merged organization.
- By doing a lot of listening and careful space planning up front, the detailed design and construction process can be accomplished very efficiently.
- Piloting The Learning Commons in our existing library has proven invaluable as we do program planning for a new library.

Key Questions to Ask

- Who are the stakeholders for a collaborative learning space project, and by which guiding principles will they operate?
- How can we provide the correct institutional perspectives to our project leaders to ensure that they understand the value of integrated services?
- Which elements should we consider when assessing the costs and benefits (both construction and organizational) of a learning commons project?
- Where can we obtain the services of a talented space planner?
- How can we include students in the planning process, especially with respect to questions about services and furniture choices?

Where to Learn More

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