

2022

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### Recommended Citation

Ghouse, Nikhat J. and Bright, Kawanna, "Something Old Can Be New Again: Learning Commons Policies & Outreach Development" (2022). *LOEX Conference Proceedings 2014*. 20.  
<https://commons.emich.edu/loexconf2014/20>

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# **SOMETHING OLD CAN BE NEW AGAIN: LEARNING COMMONS POLICIES & OUTREACH DEVELOPMENT**

**NIKHAT J. GHOUSE, KAWANNA BRIGHT**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper will discuss the evolution of learning commons spaces, and the efforts undertaken by libraries to be relevant within those spaces. We discuss how libraries and academic/non-academic student support departments can help each other with the same goal of improved student success as indicated by better study habits, improved grades and timely graduation. We also discuss the impact that outreach efforts can have on improving student/librarian engagement, and how policy development can integrate library needs, student needs, and address collaboration with university partners.

## **EVOLUTION OF LEARNING COMMONS**

One of the best articles to read to get a clear picture of how learning commons spaces have evolved in libraries is “Reviewing the Library Learning Commons: History, Models, and Perspectives” by Accardi, Cordova, and Leeder, published in *College & Undergraduate Libraries* in 2010. In their review, the authors detail how changes in technology likely led to the first discussions of combined spaces in libraries that included access to computers and technology. But the concept of an Information Commons (IC) took this idea a step further and included the use of technology as a part of the learning and research process. Success with this model provided the groundwork for the next stage in the evolution of the learning commons—the addition of student services that traditionally existed outside of the library. The idea of libraries collaborating with student support services on campus is not new. However, the learning commons created another avenue for the creation of these collaborations. Some of the common partnerships that have been formed are with writing centers, career services, residence life, information technology, tutoring services, and student affairs, just to name a few. Their article is also a treasure trove of references related to the history and development of learning commons, offering a comprehensive literature review that covers nearly every aspect of the discussions surrounding learning commons.

## **LEARNING COMMONS SPACES AT KU**

In the fall of 2010, the University of Kansas Libraries (KU Libraries) renovated the Anschutz Library’s 3rd and 4th floors to create a new learning commons space. This endeavor, called the Learning Studio, was a collaboration between the Libraries, the Division of Undergraduate Studies (formerly the Student Success Division), and Information Technology. The spaces within the Anschutz Library were selected partly due to the fact that the Library is informally seen as the “undergraduate library.” This sense of ownership by undergraduates is due in part to the building’s central location, which is within a short walking distance to the large lecture halls and numerous classroom buildings. Since undergraduate students already congregated in this library, the Learning Studio was seen an ideal opportunity to bring additional student support services into their space.

Anschutz Library was built in 1989 and held the print collections of business, education, maps, sciences, and government documents. Originally, the 2nd floor held the only three group study rooms in the library and the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor had the majority of the

individual study spaces, as well as computer workstations. The 4th floor, which was not heavily used by students, was dominated by the print collection, mainly government documents; the lower two floors (1st and 2nd) held the remainder of the print collection. The transformation of the 3rd and 4th floors into the Learning Studio required the shifting of print collections either to other floors or to the off-site annex, located a mile off campus. This took place over the summer of 2009.

It was important for the Learning Studio to support student learning by providing informal learning spaces that would be open, visible, and flexible. This meant creating spaces for the different types of student needs, including individual quiet study space, individual computer workstations, and group study and presentation spaces that could also be opportunities for collaborative work. All of these spaces would become available to students on both floors of the Learning Studio. The traditional individual quiet study spaces would remain on the 1st and 2nd floors of the Library. The renovation to create the new space took place from the summer of 2009 through the fall of 2010.

Since the grand opening on August 25, 2010, traffic in the Learning Studio has only increased. During the peak hours of 11AM to 2PM, the 3rd and 4th floors can have between 400 to 600 students studying or working together. The addition of new furniture, nine glass-walled group study rooms, and six open tutoring spaces with glass whiteboard room dividers has increased traffic to the library. Located on the 4th floor in the Learning Studio are the student support departments of the Writing Center and a satellite location for the Academic Achievement and Access Center (AAAC), the University's tutoring service. More traditional library resources, such as access and reference services, are located on the 3rd floor, along with additional individual computer workstations. The 3rd floor also features information technology support and KU Info, the University telephone service. There are 120 desktop computers (PC and Mac) for student use and fifty-four laptops available for in-building checkout. The relocation of campus partners, either wholly or as satellite offices, into the Learning Studio location in 2010 began the process of centralizing those student support departments most heavily used by undergraduates at KU.

## **LEARNING COMMONS SPACES AT FIU**

The Florida International University (FIU) Libraries recently renovated what could only be described as a classic reference space into what was themed as a Technology Hub. The original proposal for the creation of the space described the project as an initiative "to establish an infrastructure and space...that will support the learning and research needs of [a] growing community" (Ball, 2012). The Hub @ Green Library features nearly ninety high-end computers (PC and Mac) that offer students access to multimedia software and programs, two separate multimedia editing rooms, group seating spaces with built in whiteboards, portable whiteboards for additional group tables, and two laptop bars with powered tables. The renovation of this space also led to the creation of a new circulation point where students can checkout all technology offered by the libraries, moved the majority of copiers/printers into the same area, and co-located the campus Department of Information Technology's (DoIT) help desk within this space. The reference collection originally housed in the area was weeded for usefulness as well as to reduce its footprint. The space was completed after over a year of planning and construction, and opened to students in fall 2013.

FIU also has a north campus that includes its own library, the Hubert Library (HL). The success of the Hub @ Green Library led to the submission of a proposal to create a complementary space at HL. However, the user community found at the north campus is different from the community generally found at the main campus, and the planning of the Hub @ HL has turned into the ASK! Center. The idea of the ASK! Center (Academic Skills & Knowledge) is to create a space that combines the services offered by the Libraries, the Writing Center, DoIT, and the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, which will be offering grammar help and providing testing services. The space itself will have an increased number of computers for students to use, increased access to power and charging outlets, and improved access to the suite of campus resources students need most often. The ASK! Center is relying heavily on the idea that student support services have a positive impact on the successful retention and graduation of students. This space is still in the planning stages, but is a perfect example of how library spaces are changing and opening their doors to collaborative activities designed to support students.

## **THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF SERVICE PLANS**

As part of the development of the Hub @ FIU, a service plan was created in an effort to help dictate the types of activities that would take place in the space, as well as the role that the librarians would have within the space. The literature offers indications of the importance of having a service plan in place for a learning commons space, and how the plan can guide future changes within the space. Service plans are even more important in spaces that are shared by multiple campus partners, as is the case at Loyola University where the Libraries and Information Technology Services (ITS) worked together to develop a plan that would work for all staff members across both units (Haas & Stillwell, 2010). However, it should also be noted that service plans are just that, plans, and libraries should not be surprised to find their new space being used in a different way than originally outlined (Doan & Kirkwood, 2011; Wolfe, Naylor & Druke, 2010). This was certainly the case at the FIU Libraries.

At FIU, librarians were expected to have a very visible role in the Hub, as outlined by the service plan. This includes offering strategic roaming services throughout the space to assist students at their point of need and scheduled instruction within the space focused on both the different types of software available to the students, as well as other student information and instructional needs. After only one semester of watching how the students used the space, it became very clear that a librarian presence was not desired by the students within the space. Roaming efforts have yielded very few interactions with students (38 interactions in fall 2013; 22 interactions in spring 2014), and the final structure of the space has not yielded instructional opportunities for the librarians. The addition of a User Engagement Librarian will offer the FIU Libraries the opportunity to reassess the space and determine what role, if any, the librarians can have within the area. What has been popular with the students is the increased number of computers, the in-person technical services offered by DoIT as they assist students with wireless and campus ID issues, and the technology checkout desk. Due to construction issues, the two multimedia editing rooms were unavailable for use during the first year of service, so their use cannot be assessed at this time.

## **SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS (OUTREACH TO CAMPUS STUDENT RESOURCE CENTERS)**

The KU Libraries' Learning Studio has been going strong for nearly four years. Undergraduate students love the space and have adopted it as their own. The group study rooms are in constant use and can be reserved online for 30-minute increments (maximum of two hours per student) using the Springshare LibCal room scheduling system. The Writing Center and AAAC continue to have great success providing writing and tutoring support to students within the learning commons space. But beyond these two departments, there were no further interactions between other student support departments and the students in the Learning Studio. One reason was the lack of space; the library could not give away permanent space without losing student space. The other reason was staffing costs; most of the student support departments could not duplicate staff in their buildings and in the Anschutz Library during business hours. Library administration was aware that the Learning Studio held additional opportunities, but no one had determined yet what those opportunities were or how they would benefit students, the libraries, and student support departments.

The solution to this problem came to light during a conversation with library administration about the future of the Learning Studio. A discussion ensued about opportunities to provide students with visual cues that could prompt them to realize what their academic options and opportunities are. It became clear that the Learning Studio was an ideal place for this to occur. Many students, especially undergraduates, working to address immediate deadlines require "point of need" support (McCabe and Fuchs, 2011). Using outreach to bring in additional student support services would offer students the opportunity to utilize resources they don't realize that they have a need for in the near immediate or future. To bring these student support departments into Anschutz Library, we created temporary spaces where small tables could be located during peak student traffic hours. These flexible tabling spaces allow student support departments to engage with students on a one-on-one basis, addressing student concerns, scheduling follow-up appointments, and promoting the departments' services and resources to the students. The flexible tabling spaces were promoted to the Undergraduate Directors of AAAC, the Career Center, First Year Experience, Undergraduate Research, Civic & Social Responsibilities, and other related student support departments including Student Health Services, the Center for Women's & Gender Equality, and the Office of Multicultural Affairs. The majority of the offices included in the outreach efforts are located at the main student union, which is on the opposite end of the campus from Anschutz Library. Tours were given to directors and their staff during the summer of 2013 to get their feedback and gauge their interest in utilizing the Learning Studio spaces in the fall as a way of reaching undergraduate students. There was significant interest from these departments and a number of them followed through by requesting specific dates and times during the fall 2013 and spring 2014 semesters. For fall 2013 there were 39 requests for these flexible table spaces. It is too soon to tell how effective this outreach has been and what, if any, impact it has had on student learning. However, anecdotally, observation of these spaces has shown that a large number of undergraduates are stopping by and engaging with the departments who staff the tables. Future assessment of the outreach effort will include tracking items such as frequency of reservations by departments and surveying departments to see how effective they feel the outreach has been for their departments and the student services they offer.

## **CONCLUSION**

Learning commons spaces, regardless of what shape or form they take, will likely continue to be popular options for libraries looking to provide a suite of services to their students within a changing environment. Many of these efforts now include campus-wide collaborations that are mutually beneficial for all parties involved and address university-wide strategic directions. They provide an opportunity for the campus partners to reach out and meet the students where they spend the most time—in the libraries. It is important to understand that these collaborations do not devalue the library as a research space within the institution. In fact, a well-planned space that includes library outreach to student support services can allow the libraries to identify additional opportunities to reach students through the services provided by these campus partners. To understand the full value of these types

of collaborations, and how they can enhance the libraries' role in student learning and success, new research studies on learning commons space and their impact on student learning should be undertaken.

LOEX PRE-PRINT

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