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From and Information Commons to a Learning Commons: Twelve Years of Change and Innovation at the OSU Valley Library

Cheryl Middleton
Oregon State University

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by Cheryl Middleton
Associate Professor,
Oregon State University

In 1999 the Oregon State University Valley Library had just undergone an extensive remodeling process and had installed state-of-the-art technology in a library information commons. The mission of the Information Commons was to provide one central location where scholars could discover, retrieve, synthesize and create new information. In the Fall 2000 *OLA Quarterly,* Richard Griffin penned a brief article that highlighted the technological planning that took place to develop the Information Commons. In his article, he referred to the Information Commons as the centerpiece of the library. This statement holds as true today as it did ten years ago. The Information Commons has undergone significant transformations to keep up with the evolving technology and information needs of OSU's student body.

This article will focus on three major phases of development for the physical information commons; the technology, the difference between an information commons and a computer lab, and identifying what our users need in an information commons to be successful. However, it should be noted that many of the same questions we sought to answer for the physical environment also apply to the virtual environment.

When the Information Commons opened in 1998, the emphasis was on personal computers and access to the resources that were available on those computers. This was new territory for the library faculty and we were concerned about the gap between our user expectations and our expertise with the technology.

How do we handle new technology our users expect and balance that with what we can provide?

In response to this question, we hired student assistants with computer software skills and in the beginning referred our technical questions to those students. We learned by observing and by doing when the technical students were not available, and eventually developed a small library of software handbooks that we could use for harder questions. For a period of time, things remained static as we came to see the technology as simply one more tool to assist our users with their information and research needs. As we became more comfortable with this concept we began grappling with standardizing computer desktops, determining what software packages to make available, as well as finding optimum staffing for the Reference Desk in the Information Commons.

Although things in the Commons were static in this period, the library was not. While reference question statistics were dropping, technology- related questions were increasing and unlike other academic libraries, we were seeing increasing numbers of students in the library (Carlson A35). The Valley Library was the primary place on campus where students came to use computers, talk with friends, relax and study. The Commons became known as the computer lab in the library and this led us to ask, "How do we make sure that we're not just about the technology; just another computer lab on campus?"

We determined that what differentiated the Valley Library Information Commons from a computer lab was the Library's ability to provide access to expert subject content and assistance with that content, as well as providing space for non-library services that complemented and contributed to the academic success of OSU students.

The first non-library student service to join the Valley Library Information Commons was the Collaborative Learning Center (CLC). The College of Science approached the library

administration and asked us to consider partnering with them and other student success units on campus to create a space in the Information Commons where OSU students could receive drop-in tutoring in chemistry, physics, mathematics and writing. In 2004, the Collaborative Learning Center opened with the understanding that The Valley Library would provide the space, technology and building maintenance, and the academic departments would provide the peer tutors. This has been a very successful partnership and from September 2009 to May 2010, 73,711 individuals visited this service point. The development of the CLC reinforced the idea that the library was a campus "centerpiece" and students could do even more of their academic work in one location.

The next student service to join the Information Commons was Student Media Services (SMS) in September of 2009. SMS is solely supported by student fees and their mission is "to provide multimedia facilities, equipment and technical support for students producing and presenting academic work" (Student Media Services). SMS complements the mission of the OSU Libraries to be a center for student learning and work, incorporating tutoring, research, and the necessary technology support for the effective completion of student papers and projects (OSU Libraries Strategic Plan, 7).The third student service to take up residence in the Information Commons was the OSU Student Computer Help Desk. This service desk provides computer support to OSU students, staff, and faculty (Technology Support Services). The OSU Computer Help Desk and Reference Desk staffs share a desk and provide services from a single location. This service is only available to students, as it is funded by student fees. Faculty and staff in need of computer assistance services are directed to offices elsewhere in the Valley Library and can make appointments with a technician. Sharing a service point works well because many of the questions that are asked at the Reference Desk relate to OSU student computing resources, authentication for access to university computer resources and course management software (Blackboard), as well as setting up their home computers and laptops for remote access to university and library resources. Library staff continue to provide information and research assistance, as well as basic support of the computers and printers in the Information Commons. However, Reference Desk and Computer Help Desk staff can easily refer a question to each other without losing the library user in the transition. Since the opening of this service point in Fall of 2009, the Computer Help Desk has served over 2,900 students and serviced 2,152 student laptops.

The addition of these three new student service points in the Valley Library Information Commons is beneficial to the departments providing the services and to OSU students because, unlike other departments on campus, the library is open seven days a week, plus nights and weekends during the regular academic term. These student services blend well with library resources and services in the Commons, and are in alignment with the original intent of the Information Commons to create a centralized point for OSU students to meet their information discovery and creation needs.

The next question we started to explore was how to enhance the learning aspects of the Commons. In 2006, our Undergraduate Services librarian and one of our Science Librarians crafted a proposal to begin transforming the Valley Library Information Commons to a Learning Commons (Walker and Deitering, 2006). First, we relocated the reference service to a desk that was more visible to users entering the library. Next, we replaced a number of our single seat computer workstations with workstations that were designed for collaborative work and purchased task chairs on wheels for all computer workstations. Finally, we reduced our refer-

Main desk in the Learning Commons

ence collection by a fourth and furnished the reclaimed space with movable task chairs, tables, and soft chairs with arm tablets for use by students with laptop computers. While the impact of the reference desk staffing move was not measured, we did survey library users for their response to the new furnishings. We used a pop-up survey on the computer desktops that asked respondents to rank the new furnishings in the Information Commons on a six point scale. The scale ranged from "love them" to "hate them." We had 349 responses and 90 percent of the responses fell into the strongly positive categories of "love them" or "like them a lot."

Once we implemented changes in the physical environment that allowed students to create their own learning environments, we began to examine how we staffed the Reference Desk. Like many academic libraries, The Valley Library was struggling with the optimum staffing of a reference/information service point and effectively utilizing our most costly resource, the library faculty member. Our reference desk statistics had dropped by 50 percent; 17,818 questions per year in 2003 to 8,877 in 2008. Concurrently, there was an increased expectation that library faculty would engage more with academic departments to promote information literacy, identify and manage digital content, and develop online tools and services that enabled users to find, organize and create information more easily. A pool of seven part-time librarians was created to provide reference desk coverage. Library faculty worked with their department heads to arrange a reduced reference desk load or to opt out of reference desk hours so that they could spend time working on research and special projects. However, our staffing model still relied on faculty librarians for primary coverage.

In the fall of 2008, with urging from University Librarian Karyle Butcher, we began exploring staffing the reference desk in a way that did not rely on faculty librarians. We conducted a literature search to identify different models for providing academic library reference desk staffing and services. We did not find a definitive consensus, and realized that while there were similarities between academic library reference services, every institution was also unique. Next, we conducted focus groups with our part-time librarians, paraprofessionals and students that provide services at the reference desk. We started each focus group with the premise that library faculty would no longer staff the physical reference desk and asked a series of questions that included:

What is the most important service the reference desk provides?

What do you think library users want when they come to the reference desk?

What kind of training and support do you think you will need with the new model in place?

In answer to the first two questions, our part-time librarians and paraprofessional staff agreed that library users wanted a comfortable, welcoming place where they could ask any question, and they expected answers. Part-time librarians and student employees indicated that library users were not interested in instruction but just wanted the answer, and were not receptive to having to wait if the question needed to be referred to library faculty member. "They want service and they want it fast." All three focus groups indicated that in the new model with no academic librarian staffing, they wanted to receive additional training in providing reference services.

To address the requests for training and quantify the types of questions being asked at our reference desk, we logged every reference transaction for ten days in November 2008. Reference desk staff coded questions as Reference, Directional or Technical and then each transaction was reviewed by a senior library faculty member with more than ten years of experience in reference services to determine if the questions required the expertise of a library faculty member, or if they could be answered by a well-trained reference desk staff member. Our analysis of 768 transactions found that 80 percent of the questions being asked at our reference desk did not require an academic faculty member to answer them. We also identified which questions were being asked most frequently and reviewed our training materials to be sure that these areas were addressed.

In the Fall of 2009 we switched to having no faculty librarians at the Reference Desk in the Commons. The desk is staffed by a pool of part-time librarians and student assistants. Library faculty provide backup support virtually and by chat. We are still analyzing how successful our new service model has been, but anecdotally we can relate that library staff and users have been happy with the arrangement.

What's next for the Valley Library Information Commons?

Currently under the direction of our new Associate University Librarian for Innovative Services, Jennifer Nutefall, the name of our Commons has changed from the Valley Information Commons to the Valley Library Learning Commons. We reclaimed approximately 5,000 linear feet for the Learning Commons by eliminating the print reference collection. Also, we have been engaged in a conversation with library users through a series of focus group and surveys asking them how they think the space should be furnished and organized. Fall term 2010 will see yet another iteration of the Learning Commons designed to promote OSU student success.

Over the past twelve years, we have made significant changes to the Commons environment. In 2009, six library faculty members received a library innovation grant to fund visits to nine academic library commons spaces across the country. They brought back a wealth of information but one of the most important is that a Commons is not limited by physical space; the Commons concept can be embedded throughout the entire Library (Hussong-Christian, Rempel, Deitering, 2010). We're exploring what changes and innovations this will bring to today's library commons. ❧

Soft furniture in the Commons

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