Transforming the delivery of service

The joint-use library and information commons

by Charles Kratz

The new realities that are facing academic libraries today are challenging the profession to rethink service roles and define new models of service delivery. This reevaluation of roles provides opportunities for cultivating new relationships on our campuses and in our communities. In these times of libraries being marginalized in the digital age, it becomes most critical to maintain the importance and relevance of academic libraries as places of intellectual life and centers of activity. Two service models, "joint-use libraries" and "information commons" offer academic libraries unique, attractive service delivery options to help libraries rethink the library as a place for different types of learning and collaboration.

Joint-use libraries

A joint-use library can be defined as "a library in which two or more distinct library services providers . . . serve their client groups in the same building, based on an agreement that specifies the relationship between the providers."[1]

While the field has not readily embraced this form of client-focused cooperation, the idea continues to grow internationally. Prior to the 1990s, the history of joint-use libraries focused on school/public library cooperation. More recently, new development has taken place in the academic/public library arena in Australia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Sweden, and the United States.[2]

The Hamosand Library in Sweden is an example of a university/public library project. This joint-use development opened in February 2000 with two separate directors, while another Swedish academic and public library, the Almedal Library, opened in Gotland in 2001 with one director but with two employers. The Nova Southeastern University and Broward County joint-use library in Florida was completed in 2001, and the San Jose State University and the City of San Jose project is scheduled to open in 2003. A major advantage of the U.S. projects has been the development of information literacy across the community from youth to seniors.[3]

Other advantages of joint-use projects include the creation of a bridge between the general public needs and academic needs, the greater collaboration and sharing of resources, the more efficient use of funding, the extension of operating hours, the convenience to users by providing services in one location, more access to staff, and more opportunities for the development of information literacy and lifelong learning. Trends suggest steady growth and interest worldwide. An adequate record of experience now exists to provide for a greater success

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rate. However, these projects often do not save on operational, resource, and construction costs.[4]

Information commons

Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson, and Abbott Architect Carole Wedge suggests, "There's a longing for spaces in which to come together and be inspired . . . something you don't get from a laptop in Starbucks."[5]

The information commons, an innovative concept, is finding its place in many college and university libraries. Also referred to as a virtual commons, information courtyard, technology courtyard, or information environment, this model usually represents "an exclusively online environment in which the widest possible variety of digital services can be assessed via a single graphical user interface (GUI) and potentially searched in parallel via a single search engine from any networked workstation. . . . and also . . . a new type of physical facility specifically designed to organize workspace and service delivery around the integrated digital environment. . . . The Information Commons creates an environment where old boundaries are blurred and many constituent activities flow across the old unit divisions."[6]

Links to other campus users and units help fight the marginalization of libraries, provide for greater collaboration on our campuses, and furnish space to accommodate different types of learning. The physical arrangement of the information commons and the collaborative units contained therein vary from organization to organization. In some cases they take the form of departments or floors in libraries, while in others they are entire buildings. Most models include an information desk to provide for one-stop shopping and the first point of contact for the units collaborating in the information commons as well as a state-of-the-art technology and a variety of study spaces for individual/group projects and study.

Successful models can be found at Bucknell University, Colorado State University, Emory University, George Mason University, University of Michigan, University of Missouri-Kansas City, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, and University of Southern California.

The University of Scranton Weinberg Memorial Library is looking at a slight variation to the information commons concept by including the library's reference services, the university's computing help desk, and a new Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CTLE). The latter will offer faculty support of several kinds: writing and teaching colloquia, a library of materials about teaching and learning, and individual consultation on classroom issues and instructional design. The center also will offer students several services aimed at enabling them to make the most of their education. Other libraries have built a physical link to their student centers. For example, Michigan Technical University has focused on more collaborative spaces and space for food and cybercafes.[7]

Joint-use libraries and information commons projects require the desire to rethink service delivery models and to create new synergies and relationships; administrative interest and support; collaborative leaders with vision and professional commitment; willingness to meet user needs and expectations; funding for resources, staff, and space needs; a flexibility in the physical space to accommodate changing user needs; and an empowerment of staff and commitment for ongoing staff training.

In planning the library in this age of new realities and relationships, Don Riggs, vice president for information services and university librarian at Nova Southeastern University, said it best, "We are only limited by our imaginations."[8]

Notes

1. Alan Bundy, "Joint-use Libraries—The Ultimate Form of Cooperation," http://www.library.unisa.edu.au/papers/jointuse.htm, 1.

2. Ibid., 5.

3. Ibid., 6.

4. Ibid., 7, 13.

5. Jeff Morris, "The College Library in the New Age," *University Business* 5 (October 2002): 27.

6. Donald Beagle, "Conceptualizing an Information Commons," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* (March 1999), 1, 2. (Wilsonweb).

7. Morris, "The College Library in the New Age," 27.

8. John Lubans Jr., "A Portrait of Collaborative Leadership: Donald E. Riggs and Nova Southeastern University's Joint-Use Library," *Library Administration & Management* 16 (Fall 2002): 178. ∎