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A knowledge commons needs assessment

Building for the future at Penn State

Academic libraries must continuously develop new initiatives and redesign their physical spaces to create the ideal environment for study, research, and scholarship. One way to accomplish this is to create a knowledge commons. A knowledge commons brings together sustainable partnerships among academic disciplines to share resources for the purpose of educating students and enhancing scholarly research. Collaboration with information technology, tutoring centers, and other university departments allows the knowledge commons to combine digital and multimedia technologies with library programs and online collections in a warm, vibrant, and dynamic physical space. Its librarians and staff should be well trained, highly skilled, and adroit in implementing a "high tech, high touch" philosophy.[1]

Establishing knowledge commons at all campus library locations is part of the Pennsylvania State University strategic plan. The Penn State-Hazleton campus began discussions in the spring of 2010 about the creation of a library knowledge commons. The library was constructed in 1972 and has not been significantly renovated in the last 38 years. To remain an integral part of the Penn State-Hazleton educational experience, the library needed to address changing student needs, technologies, aesthetics, and structural improvements.

Following the initial discussion, the library formed a knowledge commons taskforce chaired by the head librarian with ten members from the university facilities department and the campus faculty and staff.

The taskforce is charged with planning and implementing a library knowledge commons that integrates the social facets of learning with technology, online resources, and offers a suite of programs including tutoring outposts. The taskforce initiated the process of crafting a needs assessment that would guide them in their pursuit of creating a knowledge commons. The needs assessment planning, implementation, and analysis phases occurred over a ten month period.

Performing a needs assessment is an essential element for determining what new initiatives and programs should be implemented and how the library's physical space should be repurposed or redesigned for a knowledge commons. A "need" represents the gap between what currently exists and what is desired.[2] The needs assessment process helps identify the needs, prioritizes them, provides structure for the program statement or planning document that includes specific recommendations, and finally assists in allocating resources.

However, before the needs assessment occurs, a preplanning phase should take place to garner support from campus stakeholders including, administrators, students, faculty, and staff.[3] After receiving approval from the stakeholders, a taskforce with campus-wide representation should be formed to assist with knowledge commons planning and implementation.

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The needs assessment

Several methodologies were used to solicit input for the Penn State-Hazleton Library needs assessment, including 1) site visits to three other similar libraries with knowledge commons, 2) review of the current literature on the subject of knowledge and information commons, 3) student and faculty focus groups, 4) an online campuswide survey of the library's physical space and resources, 5) survey of incoming freshman students, 6) evaluation of other knowledge commons Web sites, and 7) functional assessment of library staff work areas, including circulation, reference, and office space. Survey questions for the online campuswide survey, survey of the incoming freshmen class, and focus groups were based on data obtained from the site visits and literature review.

The site visits, literature review, student and faculty focus group responses were all qualitative in nature, while the online campuswide survey and survey of incoming freshmen students contained quantitative and qualitative data. A Penn State statistician extracted significant data from the online campuswide survey using SAS Business Analytics software.

Results and analysis of the needs assessment were posted on Microsoft SharePoint to enhance collaboration and distribution. This allowed taskforce members to view and discuss the data at a time and place convenient for them. The collection and analysis of this data guided the decisions and priorities documented in the recommendations for a more mobile, functional, and flexible library space.

Online campuswide survey results

The online survey drew 105 responses, including 29 students, 25 staff members, and 52 faculty members. It was advertised on the library's Web site, through the Student Government Association, Penn State Hazleton Facebook page, and through direct e-mail. The taskforce members were disappointed with the low response rate and consequently decided to collect additional data by surveying incoming freshmen during the First-Year Testing, Counseling and Advising Program (FTCAP).

One section of the survey gave students a list of 14 activities and asked them to select their purpose for visiting the library. They returned the following results:

- use a computer for homework (79%)
- individual and group study (at 66% and 55%, respectively)
- social networking (45%)
- reading printed material (41%)
- borrowing material (38%)
- socializing (28%)
- using Wi-Fi (28%)
- media commons editing room (10%)

Only 23 percent of students surveyed said that there were adequate places for quiet individual study in the library, and only 31 percent felt the building had enough group study spaces. Even though there was no specific question about the availability of computers, eight of the 29 students commented on the need for more technology and support infrastructure, including additional computer and software in readily accessible areas, desks/tables with electrical outlets, and designated quiet spaces with computers.

Another important component of the survey asked students to rank their priorities for a library redesign. Designated quiet study spaces topped the list and were followed in order by designated group collaborative spaces, group presentation practice rooms, new furniture, IT assistance, additional help with writing, and a videorecording room with a green screen. Most of these expressed desires were present throughout the needs assessment with the exception of the videorecording room.

Focus group results

Ten students and seven faculty members took part in focus groups to help identify other possibilities for consideration in the library renovation. Participants wanted access to all forms of information, including online databases and books. They also would like quiet study spaces, group study areas with comput-

ers, large monitors and whiteboards, tutoring centers, instruction labs, and a coffee shop.

In no particular order, focus group members returned the following suggestions for other improvements to the library's physical space: comfortable furniture, chairs with attached movable desktop near natural light, large windows with natural light, bright open spaces, new ceiling with more effective lighting, additional desktop computers, group study areas, private study rooms, presentation practice rooms, student honors room, quiet study spaces, and electrical outlets for laptops in tables, chairs, carrels, walls, and floors.

Survey of incoming freshmen

Of the 616 students matriculating Penn State-Hazleton for Fall 2010, 477 completed a brief library survey during FT CAP. Of the students surveyed, 98 percent had visited libraries (mainly high school and public libraries) and used their resources. The majority of those who had used library resources did so to study or complete homework assignments. Students were also asked to rank the importance of quiet individual study rooms, group study rooms, and comfortable furniture. They selected quiet individual study rooms as most important (48%), 45 percent selected group study rooms, and 44 percent chose comfortable furniture.

When asked for their purpose in visiting the library, a total of 17 choices were given (borrow material, photocopy material, read print material, use textbooks/material on reserve for classes, use electronic resources, use a computer for homework, use a computer for socializing/networking, study in a group, study individually, use the Wi-Fi, socialize with friends, meet with instructors/faculty, use a scanner, tutor or be tutored, IT assistance, none, or other). Respondents could select any number of responses. Among the top five results, most students (84%) said they had used the library for individual study, followed by those who had used textbooks/reserve material (81%), those who had borrowed material and read print material (73%), and those who participated in group study (72%).

Student responses differed slightly when asked to list what would attract them to the library during the upcoming semester. Twenty-four responses were listed, and of those, the top six results were:

• access to computers (fast, wireless, new technology, printing)
• library resources
• quiet areas for study
• relaxed atmosphere
• group study areas
• comfortable furniture

Incoming freshman also mentioned kind, helpful staff, tutoring, textbooks/course reserves, snack machine/coffee/refreshments, and social activities.

Recommendations

After analyzing the data from the needs assessment, the taskforce identified and prioritized the needs and posited recommendations for the knowledge commons redesign. Discussion among taskforce members and campus administration regarding implementation of the knowledge commons revolved around the creation of a multiphased approach to redesigning the library. Based on the extent of redesign, the taskforce determined that the library knowledge commons should be completed in four phases.

The library knowledge commons recommendations were shared with campus faculty and staff during Opening Day for the Fall 2010 session. Opening Day provides an in-person forum to disseminate information about the upcoming semester. Faculty and staff were also asked to comment on the recommendations via a form on the library's Web site. A total of 24 faculty completed the Web-based questionnaire. During the fall 2010 semester, 148 students in preselected courses received an overview of the proposed recommendations. They completed a brief survey that asked two questions, 1) Would you change any of the items in one phase to a different phase? 2) What else would you like to see in the library redesign? The

final recommendations of each phase reflect student and faculty feedback.

During phase one, the most urgent student needs will be addressed:

- An instruction lab with additional computers for student use
- Quiet individual study areas
- Group study spaces
- A group study sound proof room
- A group presentation practice room

Phase two comprises considerable infrastructure upgrades to enhance student-centeredness. Phase two includes:

- creation of a self-serve café
- Writing center outpost
- IT outpost

Phase three continues the infrastructure improvements from phase two and includes:

- an expanded media commons
- upgrades to the circulation/Reference Desk and library staff workspaces

Finally, phase four completes the transformation of the Hazleton Library into a knowledge commons with the creation of an honors room and an alumni room.

Conclusion

Using the results of the needs assessment, taskforce members wrote the final Penn State Hazleton Library Knowledge Commons Program Statement, which will be used by an architect to develop a feasibility study. The architectural designs from the feasibility study will then be used during the fundraising and implementation phases.

Formulating and implementing the needs assessment was not an onerous process. Overall the results did not differ significantly from expected outcomes. However, valuable information and suggestions were acquired via the needs assessment. The process also afforded the opportunity to publicize and acquire support for the project. The needs assessment is a useful tool in the creation of an academic knowledge commons.

Notes

1. Penn State Hazleton Knowledge Commons Task Force, "Penn State Hazleton Library Knowledge Commons Program Statement." (Winter 2010): 1-29.

2. James W. Altschuld, "Emerging Dimensions of Needs Assessment," *Performance Improvement 43,* no. 1 (January 2004): 10-15.

3. Michael J. Whitchurch, "Planning an Information Commons," *Journal of Library Administration* 50, no. 1 (2010): 39-49. ꝛ

There is no way that every librarian can possess all of these virtues in full measure at all times. They are not intended as a checklist. Instead these virtues should serve as a guide for development as a professional. They are qualities that librarians in the 21st century should strive for in their work and encompass much of what is necessary to be a successful, dynamic, next-gen librarian. They can inspire individuals but can also be used across the library community as a model for excellence in librarianship. Librarians today and in the future will constantly need to be re-tooling and reinventing themselves. These virtues provide a framework for continued self-improvement. And striving for improvement is the attitude that embodies a next-gen librarian.

Notes

1. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 92.

2. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Temple Smith, 1970).

3. Amy Springer and Kathryn Yelinek, "Teaching with The Situation: *Jersey Shore* as a Popular Culture Example in Information Literacy Classes," *C&RL News* 72, no. 2 (2011): 78–118. ꝛ