St. Edward’s University Learning Commons:

Literature Review and Management Toolkit

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INTRODUCTION

"The synergistic linkages between information, technology, teaching, and learning open a variety of opportunities and challenges for all of us" (Charlotte S. Patriquin, Director of Information Services and Resources at Beloit College Library).

The purpose of this paper is to review and analyze the literature on the information commons and learning commons concepts in the academic library setting, particularly in the context of the needs of the Scarborough-Phillips Library at St. Edward’s University. We examined the information commons and learning commons concepts in light of several key areas: planning and assessment, space allocation, staffing issues, services offered, resources made available, and technology issues. This report summarizes and analyzes our findings, and articulates benefits and drawbacks to the implementation of an information or learning commons in the existing library space.

INFORMATION COMMONS AND LEARNING COMMONS: DEFINITIONS

Before discussing these concepts, the terms information commons and learning commons need to be defined. We use both of these terms throughout the paper, based on the language used in each article that we discuss. The terms are frequently used interchangeably, but our research suggests that they are actually distinct concepts. Shay Keating and Roger Gabb, librarians at Victoria University in Australia, offer clear definitions of these terms which demonstrate the differences between them.

An information commons is typically a technological initiative in the library space. It may include computers, media-ready classrooms, an IT support desk, and
laptops for student check-out (Keating and Gabb 2). An information commons points to a collaboration between the library and information technology (IT) staff (ibid 2). The students can do their research and begin working on projects in the same space. A learning commons takes this idea of students researching and writing in the library a few steps further. Learning commons are spaces in the library or as their own buildings that provide research assistance from librarians, technical assistance from IT staff, and an array of other services that support student learning (Keating and Gabb 3). In many cases, the writing center has a presence in the learning commons (ibid 3).

Learning commons come in many shapes and sizes. Some learning commons are free-standing structures, while most are integrated into new or existing library space (Forrest & Hinchliffe 298). Learning commons are specially-designed spaces that incorporate research and technology services and may include specialized study and work areas (ibid 297).

THE ROLE OF THE INFORMATION COMMONS AND LEARNING COMMONS IN TODAY’S ACADEMIC LIBRARY

Why bother with a learning commons? Most importantly, the learning commons is a place where, “students can develop effective strategies for learning and acquire a multitude of skills necessary for academic success” (Franks 110). It is therefore important that groups serving the user at a university work together. Good technology helps libraries because technology offers a “wider variety of tools and capabilities to achieve the [library’s] objectives” (Webb 30). Libraries also run the risk of becoming "frozen" in time if they do not respond to their users' needs for enhanced technology
If the goal for libraries is to provide the best service possible for their users, then libraries need to understand users’ need for assistance. Users’ needs do not necessarily follow the traditional academic library and university organizational structure separating library and information technology departments: “If we are to provide the best possible service for users in new library environments, then it is essential that we recognize and accommodate our users’ impatience with old fashioned demarcations between reference and computer help” (Crockett 182).

Forrest and Hinchliffe describe how a learning commons fits into the growth of the library as a learning and teaching space: “there is ongoing experimentation and innovation with facilities, technologies, staffing patterns, and service programs,” (297). This experimentation allows each institution to find suitable combinations of service and resources for their particular library.

**PLANNING AND ASSESSMENT**

The addition of an information or learning commons requires a great deal of planning and preparation to ensure that the new facility supports the mission and needs of the library’s home institution. Donald Beagle stresses the importance of strategic planning in *The Information Commons Handbook*: “Strategic planning efforts must turn on an axis that extends between two key relationships: (1) the relationship between the library and its users (students AND faculty), and (2) the relationship between the library and its hosting or funding institution” (58).
In order to ensure that both of these relationships are thoroughly explored in the planning process, library architect Geoffrey Freeman recommends the creation of a task force that includes administrators, librarians, students, and faculty. He notes that both Duke and Dartmouth used this method to explore options for expanding their library facilities, with the end result being “…a vision for the library within the context of the institution…” that was used for long-term planning of library spaces (7).

Brigham Young University used a similar approach, creating a team composed of members of the faculty senate, the university's office of information technology, the Center for Instructional Design, and the university's student government. The team "performed an environmental scan of best practices for information commons through scouring the literature and searching the Internet" and visited institutions that had already implemented an information commons (Whitchurch, Belliston and Baer 263).

In addition to including representatives of the entire university community in the planning process, developing a cohesive strategic vision is a crucial part of the planning process. In a chapter of an Educause publication entitled Learning Spaces, Joan K. Lippincott writes that the mission statement should be developed as part of an "iterative process," and will "guide the development of a coordinated assessment program for the information commons" (7.10). Developing a strategic vision therefore would both ensure that the planning process is deliberate and meaningful, and lay the groundwork for appropriate assessment that reflects the long-term goals of the new space.

Methods of assessment after the implementation of the learning/information commons are also discussed in the literature. According to the ARL SPEC report on the
information commons prepared by Haas and Robertson, fourteen out of the twenty-two libraries featured in their report kept statistics on users and services provided. Other methods of evaluation included formal and informal feedback from users and feedback from staff (42). Lippincott echoes these suggestions, advocating a combination of both qualitative and quantitative assessment tools (7.10).

Assessment should be tied to the strategic vision for the learning commons, and it should be multi-faceted. It should also be developed collaboratively by the different service areas involved in the learning commons. The University of Guelph is an example of an institution that has developed a "shared culture around assessment practices" (Schmidt and Kaufman 251). The different service areas of the learning commons worked together to develop an online survey that assessed the needs of their users in a wide variety of areas. The directors of different areas of the University of Guelph's learning commons use these survey results to make changes according to user needs, and also to more broadly assess whether the learning commons continues to meet its goals (ibid 251).

SPACE ALLOCATION

Space organization in an information or learning commons varies according to the institution's needs. In a 1999 article published in The Journal of Academic Librarianship, Donald Beagle states that such facilities tend to share several commons features, including some kind of information desk, as well as a "...coordinated and expanded set of study and workspaces offering an array of options ranging from traditional individual study to collaborative conference areas" (3). Whitchurch, Belliston, and Baer caution
that, without effective planning, "the result is nothing more than a computer lab surrounding a reference desk." They state that effective service is the "key to success," and that the location of workstations is important as well (264). The service desk element is addressed in the service component of this literature review, so this particular section will focus on workstations and study areas.

Keating and Gabb state that the space should "be purposely designed to promote student learning and not just to suit library operations." The utilization of library spaces should reflect "the collaborative learning which is increasingly emphasised (sic) in the undergraduate curriculum," but also preserve space for quiet, individual study (12). Lippincott notes that group study areas were previously considered "a peripheral feature of the library," but the information and learning commons models make these spaces a central feature of the library. Lippincott goes on to list different types of group spaces that may occur in an information or learning commons:

Information commons frequently have furniture built to accommodate several people sharing a common computer and provide large tables where several students can use their laptops while working together, comfortable seating areas with upholstered furniture to encourage informal meetings, cafes with food and drink, and group study rooms, often with a computer and screen...(7.3).

Whitchurch, Belliston, and Baer suggest that these collaborative workspaces should potentially take priority over traditional features of a library reference area, such
as the print reference collection and the desk (264-265). They suggest the addition of both self-contained study rooms, which should include computers and other collaborative technology tools, as well as group study areas without walls that would "foster a less rigid atmosphere." They do mention that noise could be a problem with these types of areas, so these areas should be carefully placed to avoid affecting quiet study areas (ibid 265).

**STAFFING ISSUES**

*Cross Departmental Integration*

There are understandable challenges when combining information technology and library departments or following any other model that involves interdepartmental communication. Differences in information technology and library service cultures are emphasized throughout the literature. Bob Johnson at Rhodes College discusses both departments’ unique cultures and the potential “to quarrel” (Heid). Moreover, technologists tend to “approach a task in terms of the technology and its characteristics for solving specific problems” (Webb 27). Librarians on the other hand are, “conscious not of technology and its features, but of the way they themselves feel and react as service providers to the actual pressures placed on them in the performance of their duties” (Webb 27).

Given these daunting challenges, it’s no surprise that the Council on Library and Information Resources has discovered that universities that completely merge their Information Technology and Library departments are not numerous (Heid). Such a
merger does, however, provide a “functional view of combined organization” according to Thomas Kirk at Earlham College (Heid).

Regardless of which learning or information commons model is followed, effective, open communication is the most frequently cited solution to interdepartmental challenges throughout the literature. This includes communication among users, departments, and administrators. The communication process required to bring about change is similar to what reference librarians call the “reference interview” – it involves listening and understanding as well as a dialogue among all parties involved (Webb 28). In the case of Indiana University at Bloomington’s Learning Commons, partners agreed to explicitly outline their roles by “writing and signing a Memorandum of Agreement that spelled out responsibilities and expectations, both financial and operational” (Dallis 250).

As mentioned in the planning and assessment section of this report, university-wide planning is crucial to the successful implementation of a learning or information commons. Ideally, the results of this planning process should be communicated and understood by everyone throughout the organization. In addition to administrators and users, front-line employees should be involved in making decisions if customer service is the ultimate goal (“Serving the American Public”). Most importantly at all levels, “accountability and interdependence play a role in cross-functional collaboration and partnerships” (Serving the American Public).
Staffing and Training

Migrating a traditional academic library to a learning commons model understandably has a major impact on staffing and training. According to the Association of Research Libraries, the most common staffing model includes, “librarians, computing professionals, and public services staff” (Spencer 244). Looking at the “types of activities users will engage in and what services will be needed to support those activities” is a start in determining how staff will be organized (Lippincott 7.10). According to the ARL survey of information commons, some methods of staffing the information commons include adjusting existing job descriptions, creating new positions, reassigning staff and employing student assistants (Keating and Gabb 8).

Despite all the variables in models (co-location of different services at the same desk, separate facilities, single-point service desk with cross-trained employees), some recurring themes emerge. The abundant literature on staffing the learning commons emphasizes the importance of training, good management, mentoring, teams, and communication.

Employee-focused organizations, cross-functional teamwork and mentoring are important throughout the training literature. Moreover, training for staff should be “learning-oriented,” “learner-centered,” “university wide,” and “flexible” (Keating and Gabb 18). A “learner-centered” organization prepares learners for “self access” approaches to learning which involve “learner autonomy and independence, accommodating different learning preferences and needs and accommodating learning beyond the classroom” (ibid 6). Other helpful suggestions from the literature include
avoiding reliance on a “one size fits all” training module and providing a referral plan so that staff can accurately refer questions (Spencer 315).

Thomas Kirk at Earlham College discusses how employees need to adjust to a change in learning environments (students now do posters, class presentations, pod casts, work in teams) (Heid). Moreover, “Staff must be open to retraining and willing to redefine their roles, and maintain a positive attitude regarding innovative approaches to library services that are based on user needs” (Church 80). Hiring educated and computer-literate staff works best in such a complex, customer-oriented environment (Serving the American Public). Employee satisfaction impacts customer service, so hiring staff well-suited to this environment is critical (Serving the American Public).

Management

Current management literature is brimming with discussion of “change management,” “knowledge-based organizations” and “learning organizations,” all of which are issues that apply to libraries. T.D. Webb looks to management guru Peter Drucker and his theories on the "knowledge based-organization" as a model for change in libraries. He discusses Drucker's comparison of staffing to a "jazz combo" (responsive, changing) and an environment in which leadership within the team shifts with different assignments (Webb 33). Obviously, hiring processes and job descriptions that identify proper skills are crucial. Employers should also provide their employees with the tools needed for them to do their jobs (Serving the American Public).
The services offered in a learning commons are part of what makes the space different from a traditional library venue. Academic libraries must keep up with the ever-growing impact of technology on the traditional academic activities of research and writing. Forrest and Hinchliffe explain how this new technological impact, as well as a shift in learning and teaching styles, has created an opportunity for innovative information and service purveyance in academic libraries (296). The teaching style in practice today in many universities includes collaboration and team-building projects (ibid 296). Today’s students are inclined to use conferencing and work in groups to discover new information and do research (ibid 296). These styles, coupled with today’s student’s expectation that library resources should be available anywhere and anytime via the Internet, lead libraries to new ideas about service (ibid 297).

Reference and research assistance plays an essential role in learning commons. These services are available in many forms such as a traditional reference desk, roving reference librarians, virtual reference (via chat and email), and tiered reference where students and/or library staff are the front line for questions and upper level questions are referred to librarians (Spencer 244). Reference assistance is sometimes included in a combined service point with other departments. According to the ARL survey, about half of the information commons surveyed have one service point where reference assistance, technical support, and other services are provided. The rest of the information commons have between two and four service points (Haas & Robertson 12).
To provide comprehensive service, technical support must accompany the inclusion of technology in the learning commons. Professional and student IT staff are on-hand in many learning commons to trouble-shoot laptop problems, instruct patrons on how to use software, maintain computer workstations, assist with printing, network issues, logging into library’s electronic resources, and supporting library staff as well as patrons (Dallis & Walters 254).

Some learning commons incorporate the university’s writing center. When the writing center is located in the learning commons, writing center staff can pick up where librarians leave off. Once the research is done, students can move from the reference desk to the writing center for instruction, editing, and other services (Whitchurch, Belliston & Baer 267).

As discussed in the staffing section, all of these services are provided by combinations of personnel from students to library staff to professional librarians to employees from other departments on campus. Service points can be combined to offer a “one-stop shopping” point of contact with librarians, or can be dispersed throughout the information commons space (Church 75).

Challenges for implementing and managing learning commons services include integration of staff from different departments, which we discussed in the staffing section. Budgeting for these integrated services should also be carefully developed during the planning stages in order to maximize expenditures.
RESOURCES

The print and digital resources found in learning commons differ with the needs and policies of the institutions that house them. According to the ARL survey on the information commons, resources are usually allocated during the planning stages of implementing an information commons. By making the most of existing print and electronic resources, libraries can save time and money (13).

Learning commons may or may not include traditional print reference resources. In some cases, they include small, pared-down reference collections. In other cases, there are no print resources available at all. For example, the Student Learning Center at the University of Georgia does not house books. Instead the center offers research assistance, technical support, laptop checkout, computer workstations, and access to the University’s electronic resources (Univ. of Georgia). Print materials are kept at other libraries on campus.

According to the ARL survey, most information commons have a print reference collection that also serves the rest of the library (12). Resources offered in these collections tend to be traditional print resources such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, writing style manuals, and computer handbooks. Although many reference resources are available electronically, reference collections in information commons tend to include heavily-used materials in print format (ibid 12).

Digital resources available in information commons are the electronic resources to which the library subscribes (ARL 12). Patrons typically access these e-books, databases,
and journal articles through the library website. The advantage of making these available in the information commons is that patrons can search available resources, narrow down articles and other items that are related to their topic, and download full-text all in one sitting as opposed to searching for a journal, getting it off the shelf, and making copies of pertinent articles (Church 75).

TECHNOLOGY

The software available in information commons ranges from word processing to specialized statistical software packages. All of the information commons surveyed by the ARL offer Internet browsing applications on their workstations and most offer email applications. Most information commons offer word processing, spreadsheet, and presentation software. A majority of information commons provide scanning and graphics software as well (ARL 13).

The ARL survey reports that the average number of computer workstations available was 111 (12). Learning commons tend to use various arrangements of workstations. Some are secluded and have carrel-type walls sectioning off individual work space. Other workstations are arranged in group orientations so multiple students can work together, each on their own computer (Whitchurch, Belliston & Baer 264).

The computing labs in information commons tend to offer printing and scanning capabilities (Haas & Robertson 13). Many labs have laptops available for check out (ibid). Some learning commons are looking ahead to the future of web browsing. One university included advanced network technology including a high-capacity monomode
optical fiber network to handle bandwidth-hungry web applications like video and audio (Degkwitz, 433).

Along with personal and small group space, some learning commons have separate labs that include multimedia equipment like video and audio projection. Some learning commons have classrooms that are suited to the needs of the staff and patrons including flexible furniture arrangements, laptops, traditional desk set-ups, and multimedia capabilities for library instruction and non-library teaching (Whitchurch, Belliston & Baer 264).

The price of providing extensive hardware and software options in a learning commons can be high, especially in an environment where many libraries are experiencing budget cuts. If a library does not have a technology budget when implementing a learning commons, it may be more cost effective to upgrade existing workstations and forego outfitting new media labs. One innovative solution is a classroom-on-wheels: a cart with a laptop and other multimedia equipment that could be taken to existing learning spaces or classrooms without permanent technology capabilities (Forrest & Hinchliffe, 299).

CONCLUSION AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementing a learning or information commons involves a sea change in interdepartmental communication, relationships and organizational structure. It involves and affects everything and everyone from reporting lines to job descriptions to university budgets. When a library considers implementing an information or learning commons,
the key preparation elements are open communication with stakeholders and long-term planning. The major participants include, but are not limited to university administration, information technology and library departments, and other non-library departments such as writing centers and instructional technology; and perhaps most importantly, the library’s user population.

The literature also points to the need for comprehensive planning before implementation with all the major players involved. A task force should be created that includes members from all groups of stakeholders, including administration, students, librarians, library staff, IT staff, and any other departments that are involved. This group sets goals for the information or learning commons that align with library and university goals. It is important to create a plan for implementing the information or learning commons that will win long-term support and buy-in from administration. This support, combined with input from library patrons, and sufficient planning, will make the implementation and life of the learning commons more successful.
Works Cited


Forrest, Charles and Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe. "Beyond Classroom Construction and Design."


<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/npr/library/papers/benchmrk/1stpcus.html>.


Introduction to the Management Toolkit

This toolkit includes suggestions and tools that can be used if and when the St. Edward’s University library implements a learning commons. These tools and ideas were gathered from the library science literature regarding learning commons and input from the library staff.

This toolkit should be used as a starting point for planning and implementing the learning commons. Utilize this toolkit in part or whole to suit the needs of the project.

Thank you to Kate Silton and Margy Warner for their help in preparing this toolkit and their excellent contributions to the literature review.
Funding for the Learning Commons

Funding for the realization of a learning commons needs to be carefully planned. By definition, implementing a learning commons will add technology and resources to a library’s budget. This may also include hiring new staff members or taking on staff from other university departments. Additionally, if new space or renovation is needed, this will add substantial costs.

When planning the budget, consider the costs of construction/renovation (consultation with architects, building materials, labor), new technology (hardware, software, online resources), salary and wages for learning commons staff, and long term maintenance of the learning commons (including assessment, computer updates, special projects, etc).

It may be possible to obtain internal funding from St. Edward’s University Advancement fund. The information found in this toolkit and literature review can be used to prepare a proposal to present to the University Advancement committee. Below is the web address for more information about the University Advancement fund.

http://www.stedwards.edu/giving/index.html

While pursuing the possibility of funding from the university, library staff may also consider looking for funding from an external source. Many private, federal, and corporate grants are available for library projects like a learning commons.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services offers the National Leadership Grants. These grants aim to support projects that generate new tools, research, models, services, practices, or alliances that can be applied in other institutions and advance the ability of museums and libraries to preserve culture, heritage and knowledge while enhancing learning.
The St. Edward’s learning commons can achieve these principles by creating or implementing an assessment tool and report schedule to make the results and success of the learning commons available for other institutions to examine. The learning commons staff can contribute data and opinions about the project to fulfill the IMLS goal.

To demonstrate how the St. Edward’s learning commons project meets the goals of the National Leadership grant, the proposal must meet certain requirements and address specific ideas. The grant must make a “strategic impact” on the challenges that libraries face today. By implementing innovative technology solutions in a collaborative learning environment, the library would be meeting the information needs of their technologically-advanced user population. Through the preparation of a literature review, and through the formation of a learning commons task force, the library could demonstrate their solid foundation for “innovation” that the IMLS is looking to support with this grant. Finally, the library can demonstrate the willingness and enthusiasm to “collaborate” to achieve the goals of the learning commons by partnering with outside organizations.

The next deadline for application is February 1, 2008. The grants are awarded in amounts between $50,000 and $1,000,000. For grants over $250,000, one-to-one matching is required. For grants under $250,000, cost-sharing of one third is encouraged. Granting periods can extend up to three years. For more information about the National Leadership grants, visit this site:

http://www.imls.gov/applicants/grants/nationalLeadership.shtm

The library staff can use the IMLS application planning webpage to create their grant application:

http://www.imls.gov/project_planning/
Learning Commons Implementation Timeline
The chart on the following page outlines the concurrent processes that may be necessary during the learning commons implementation process. This timeline starts with the assumption that the learning commons has been approved by stakeholders, and the idea has been given administrative support at St. Edward’s University.

The chart uses the letters A through K to indicate which procedure correlates with which bar in the timeline. The explanation is as follows:

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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Create task force.</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>Task force sets goals, allocates budget, begins designing resources and services to be offered in learning commons.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Task force and architect plan the spatial redesign.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Create learning commons training and policy documentation.</td>
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<td>E</td>
<td>Spatial redesign begins.</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Order and purchase new technology and resources.</td>
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<td>G</td>
<td>IT and library staff receive learning commons training.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Implement new technology and resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Testing period for new technology.</td>
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<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>IT and library staff receive software and equipment training.</td>
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<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Assessment program begins.</td>
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Learning Commons Mission Statement

The learning commons in the Scarborough-Phillips Library strives to uphold the goals of the library and of the university as stated in the St. Edward’s University mission statement:

_The university promotes excellence in teaching and learning in an environment that encompasses the campus classroom, student life programs and the broader community._

The learning commons sustains these goals by offering a technology-infused environment of researching and student learning support. The library staff has partnered with the information technology experts on campus to provide a new type of library service. The reference and information technology services offered in this space encourage productivity for individuals and collaboration for groups. The learning commons also promotes information literacy and technical proficiency through designated instruction classrooms and skilled information experts on duty.

The library aims to support many types of learning and working by providing various types of study space, from individual, quiet areas to collaborative learning spaces. This is in response to students’ learning styles. The learning commons will continue to grow and adapt to best support student learning.
Learning Commons Policy Suggestions

While the learning commons is an extension of the library and functions under the same policies and guidelines of the university and library, it may benefit the organization and patrons to create some unique policy.

I. Introduction

This policy statement is to be used in operations of the Scarborough-Phillips learning commons. This is a flexible document and can adapt as needed. It is to be used by the staff who work in the learning commons as a tool for decision-making and ensuring smooth operations.

II. Community Profile

The learning commons community consists of the students, faculty, and staff of St. Edward’s University, as well as the broader Austin community. The student body is made up of undergraduate and graduate students.

III. Mission Statement

The learning commons in the Scarborough-Phillips Library strives to uphold the goals of the library and the university as stated in the St. Edward’s University mission statement:

\[\text{The university promotes excellence in teaching and learning in an environment that encompasses the campus classroom, student life programs and the broader community.}\]

The learning commons sustains these goals by offering a technology-infused environment of researching and student learning support. The library staff has partnered with the information technology experts on campus to provide a new type of library service. The reference and information technology services offered in this space encourage productivity for individuals and collaboration for groups. The learning commons also promotes information literacy and technical proficiency through designated instruction classrooms and skilled information experts on duty.

The library aims to support many types of learning and working by providing various types of study space, from individual, quiet areas to collaborative learning spaces. This is in response to students’ learning styles. The learning commons will continue to grow and adapt to best support student learning.
IV. Learning Commons Collection Policy

The learning commons utilizes the print and electronic collections of the Scarborough-Phillips library, which falls under the broader library collection development policy. If the need for a special collection were to arise, the lead librarian in charge of managing the learning commons would oversee the collection development. These resources may include computer hardware and software manuals, writing style manuals, specialized reference items, specialized electronic resources (such as databases or e-books), or audio/visual materials. If that collection becomes large enough, a more comprehensive collection development policy may be necessary.

V. Computer Use

The computers may be used by anyone with a valid St. Edward’s University login name and password.

The temporary login procedure works on the learning commons computers.

Computers are to be used to research and school-related tasks. If there is not a wait for a computer workstation, computers may be used freely for any purposes. If there is a wait, however, as indicated by the electronic waiting list, students will be asked to leave the computer if they are not working on a project for school.

VI. Food and Drink

Food and drink are allowed in the library only in the lobby area and the area near the café. Drinks are allowed at tables and throughout the library if they have a lid. Food is not allowed in the stacks or near computer workstations.

VII. Cell Phones

Patrons are allowed to use cell phones in the library lobby. Cell phone use is not permitted in the learning commons area or while at any of the service desks. Although it is a collaborative study area, personal calls should be limited to the lobby.

VIII. Laptop Check-out

Any student or staff member with a valid St. Edward’s University ID card may check out a laptop. Laptops come with standard office software and wifi capabilities. They are available for 2 day check-out. They are checked-out with a carrying case and power chord. Everything must come back when the laptop is checked-in to complete the check-in process.
IX. Internet Access

Students and staff may access the wifi Internet through St. Edward’s network if they have their own laptop. A valid login name and password is needed.

X. Staff Training

As outlined in the training materials, all learning commons staff are to receive basic library operations and IT training. This provides a baseline for customer service.

XI. Referrals

Learning commons staff should abide by this referral policy to make sure patron questions are answered as fully as possible. This policy applies at the combined service point and throughout the learning commons.

- Questions about catalog searching, database searching, special library equipment use (microfilm, screen readers), and citation formatting should be referred to library staff or librarians
- Questions about in-depth research, advanced catalog searching, subject area topics, and devising research strategies should be directed to librarians
- Technical issues regarding computer and network security, software and hardware troubleshooting, use of special computer equipment should be referred to IT staff
- In-depth circulation questions, late fee questions, and reports of lost books should be directed to high-level library staff

XII. Combined Service Point

This service desk provides research assistance and IT support for learning commons patrons. It is to be staffed by at least one librarian or library staff member at all times that the learning commons is open. When the part-time IT staff are on duty, there should be an IT representative at the desk as well. See Referral policy for clarification about who is the authority for certain types of questions.

XIII. Policy Updates

To remain a viable document, this policy needs to be reviewed and updated semiannually. At the beginning of each fall and spring semester, the lead learning commons librarian should gather a representative group of learning commons staff members and go over any changes, suggestions, or transitions that need to be implemented into this policy statement.
Learning Commons Training

The main personnel working in the learning commons are librarians, library staff, information technology (IT) staff, and other student learning support staff. These training guidelines will focus on library employees and IT staff because they will work closely in the same library space and will receive many of the same types of questions and requests for assistance. These guidelines can provide a starting point for formulating the working culture of the learning commons.

Each group of employees needs basic knowledge of library operations, IT support, and reference assistance, at least to be able to make referrals. The groups will bring their own experiences, expertise, and specialty knowledge to the learning commons. These training guidelines serve as an outline to creating a minimum level of competency among employees in order to provide effective customer service in the learning commons.

Library Operations

- Directional information – locations of computers, printers, rest rooms, telephones, quiet and collaborative study areas, circulation, reference, IT support, special collections, instruction classrooms, staff offices, equipment (microfilm readers, A/V equipment, laptop checkout)
- Functions – hours, services available, food and drink policy, cell phone policy, study room reservation procedure, interlibrary services, how to access student learning support (tutors, writing center)
- Basic reference – how to get to the library website and catalog, how to find a call number, how to make an interlibrary loan
With different departments and specialists working together to provide customer service, it is important for learning commons staff to know where their responsibilities end and other employees’ begin. Constructing the hierarchy of management in the learning commons is a delicate process because departments converge under new management. Once the structure is in place, learning commons staff must uphold the organization and fulfill their defined roles.

Referrals

- Questions about catalog searching, database searching, special library equipment use (microfilm, screen readers), and citation formatting should be referred to library staff or librarians
- Questions about in-depth research, advanced catalog searching, subject area topics, and devising research strategies should be directed to librarians
- Technical issues regarding computer and network security, software and hardware troubleshooting, use of special computer equipment should be referred to IT staff
- In-depth circulation questions, late fee questions, and reports of lost books should be directed to high-level library staff

Staff should stay within their jurisdiction when answering questions unless they have received appropriate training for answering higher-level queries. That said, continuing education and higher-level training should be made available to staff as they master the skills required in their position if they seek promotion or career advancement.
St. Edward’s University Learning Commons

Sample Factsheet – to be made available as promotional material before opening of Learning Commons

Resources

- 150 computer workstations
- Wireless Internet access available throughout library building and campus
- 8 laptop computers available for student check-out
- Printing, scanning, copying, faxing available
- Scarborough-Phillips Library print and electronic collection

Services

- IT support
- Reference and research assistance
- Chat and email reference
- Writing center

Staff

- Librarians and library staff
- Part-time and full-time IT department employees
- Student library staff and student IT staff

Technology

- Word processing, email, Internet browsing, presentation software
- Multimedia-equipped instruction classroom with twenty student computer stations
- PC and Mac stations available
- Guest wifi network

Space

- Group study rooms
- Collaborative study areas
- Individual carrels
- 20,000 ft² space
# Learning Commons Best Practices Quick Reference

| Planning | • Achieve support from university administrators  
|          | • Create a task force consisting of members of all the stake holder groups  
|          | • Write a set of goals and objectives that will drive the progress of the learning commons |
| Personnel | • Allow time for staff from outside departments to transition to the learning commons model and to working in the library  
|          | • Supervisors should communicate to all staff members how they contribute to the success of the learning commons |
| Budget   | • The library can lower expenditures by maximizing the use of existing resources  
|          | • Make forward-thinking purchase decisions based on technology that will not be obsolete in a few years and resources that will continue to be valuable |
| Policy   | • The learning commons policy needs buy-in and cooperation from many departments and managers for it to work, when done correctly this should lead to better customer service  
|          | • Get buy-in by demonstrating how departments and students will benefit from a successful learning commons |
| Services | • There are many options and combinations for learning commons services, design to fit your institution’s needs, which services support student learning in accordance with institution goals?  
|          | • Integrated and separate reference and technology support desks have been observed to work equally well depending on staff preference  
|          | • Be careful not to create too many service points - find ways to bring staff and services together |
| Technology | • Be innovative with what equipment you already have  
|           | • Provide the same baseline software available on every computer in the library  
|           | • Make laptops available for student check-out  
|           | • Tailor software choices to student needs (email, word processing, |
| Space          | Presentations)  
|----------------|------------------
|                | • Choose innovate, flexible study space arrangements and service desk orientations  
|                | • Build in the opportunity to grow – how might the space be adapted in the future?  
|                | • Draw students in by allowing food, drinks, collaborative study  
|                | • Furniture must be flexible, comfortable, attractive, and moveable  
| Evaluation     | • Build evaluation into your policy, deliver reports to stakeholders  
|                | • Collect qualitative and quantitative data to gather a broad understanding of what users think of the learning commons (ex - Questionnaires, interviews, gate counts, feedback, online surveys, etc.)  
| Resources      | • Use existing library reference collection to support research in learning commons  
|                | • Use user feedback to determine online collection development purchases  
| Combined service desk | • Staff this desk with library staff, librarians, and IT staff.  
|                | • A strong referral policy will help make referrals at this desk go smoothly and will provide the best customer service to the patron.  

**Questionnaire Results and Analysis**

To gain understanding of the state of learning commons practice among peer institutions, the St. Edward’s learning commons research team created a questionnaire. Peer institutions were chosen based on similar size and religious affiliation to St. Edward’s. We called the reference desks at each peer institution library and asked for the most appropriate contact to discuss the library’s learning commons, or if a learning commons had been considered. We created a questionnaire (See next page) that asked about space design, how their learning commons is defined, services and resources provided, and funding.

We received three responses. Of the three respondents, one person worked in a library with an learning commons, one worked in a library that is planning to implement an learning commons, and the other worked in one with no learning commons and no plans for one. Respondents were not required to answer every question, and thus the data received is incomplete. The results of the questionnaire are inconclusive as to the state of learning or information commons practice among St. Edward’s peer institutions.

We discovered a related project that is currently underway. Susan McMullen of Rogers University took a research sabbatical and visited eighteen libraries with learning commons. She took pictures, conducted interviews, and wrote full reports about each site. She is in the process of gleaning best practices and analysis from her research. Her project would be worth revisiting when St. Edward’s is ready to move ahead with learning commons planning.

McMullen’s project website:

http://faculty.rwu.edu/smcmullen/index.html
LEARNING COMMONS QUESTIONNAIRE

Space Design/Evaluation

Who was involved in planning the new library space?

☐ students ☐ faculty ☐ staff ☐ librarians

☐ library staff ☐ architects ☐ consultants ☐ IT personnel

☐ administrators ☐ others, please describe:

Who funded the IC/LC project?

Is it externally funded, or does the operating budget come out of library and/or IT budgets?

☐ externally funded ☐ library ☐ IT budget

How much funding is required to run the IC/LC?

Is your space adaptable for changes in both technology and in student learning patterns?

☐ Yes ☐ No

How does your institution define the information commons/learning commons/whatever you call it?

Is the IC/LC in a previously existing library space? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If so, what changes were required to create it? Were renovations necessary?

Services

What services are provided as part of the info/learning commons?

☐ writing center ☐ IT support ☐ reference/research assistance

☐ virtual reference ☐ other, please specify:

Describe the service points in your library.

Who staffs the service points?
If multiple services are provided at one desk, are employees cross-trained?

Who do the various employees report to?

What types of study areas are available?

Resources

Does the library have any media-equipped rooms?  □ Yes  □ No

If so, what type of equipment is available?

Does the library offer a wireless Internet connection?  □ Yes  □ No

Does the library have laptops or other equipment available for checkout?  □ Yes  □ No  If so, please specify:

What type of special software do the library workstations offer?

Were any online or print resources added to the library in conjunction with the learning commons opening?  □ Yes  □ No

If so, please specify:

What special software or equipment is available for disabled patrons?

Miscellaneous

If your library does not have a learning or information commons, has the institution discussed this idea?  □ Yes  □ No

Are you interested in receiving the results of this survey? We will compile the answers and send them out in an email.  □ Yes  □ No