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7 Things You Should Know About the Modern Learning Commons

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THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT™ ... THE MODERN LEARNING COMMONS

Scenario

As Lauren enters the learning commons for a meeting, she pauses in The Plaza, a bustling, open area where students have pulled chairs and cushions into informal groups for discussion. She catches sight of a large poster—part of a display of student work from a graduate course called Visual Statistics—that shows a map of the United States with colors that represent areas hardest hit by the recession. As she examines it, her phone buzzes with a text message from David. “We are here,” the message says, displaying a map of the commons with an arrow pointing to a team station—a collaborative space with large screens for group work.

Lauren finds the group ready to start work on the documentary video they will be making for their course in Politics and the Economy. Their video will ask whether personal income correlates with voting choice. Lauren mentions the map in The Plaza, which would make a great backdrop. Can they use it? The question is overheard by Wade, on duty as roving commons support staff. He drops by to chat with them, recommending they contact the student who made the poster and obtain a release. Because they all took a commons-sponsored workshop that included information on copyright and new media, they can use the release form recommended there. Then Wade will let them in to shoot video before the commons opens. After the meeting, Lauren again studies the poster, which reminds her of a map she once saw illustrating county-by-county voting from the last presidential election. If she were to overlay the two maps, would that be interesting? She heads for the commons reference desk for help finding the political map she needs.

When Lauren’s team finds video editing trickier than anticipated, they schedule an hour-long session with Luisa, one of the commons’ multimedia gurus, who works with them in the lab to smooth out editing glitches and upload the final product.

In class the following week, the team presents the documentary. In addition to the poster in the background, their work features an interview with its creator, who demonstrates his points with animated graphs. He had helped Lauren overlay her political map on his economic one. Viewing it on the screen now, she’s pleased with what it illustrates and with the job her team has done on their project.

1 What is it?

The learning commons, sometimes called an “information commons,” has evolved from a combination library and computer lab into a **full-service learning, research, and project space**. The modern commons is a meeting place, typically offering at least one area where students can rearrange furniture to accommodate impromptu planning sessions or secure a quiet place to work near a window. In response to course assignments, which have taken a creative and often collaborative turn in the past two decades, the learning commons provides areas for group meetings, tools to support creative efforts, and on-staff specialists to provide help as needed. And yet the successful learning commons does not depend solely upon adaptable space configuration or the latest technological gear. Its strength lies in the relationships it supports, whether these are student-to-student, student-to-faculty, student-to-staff, student-to-equipment, or student-to-information. Effective learning commons are alive with the voices of students working together, establishing the kinds of connections that promote active, engaged learning.

2 How does it work?

The village green, or “common,” was traditionally a place to graze livestock, stage a festival, or meet neighbors. This concept of social utility underlies the philosophy of the modern learning commons, which is a flexible environment built to accommodate multiple learning activities. Designing—or redesigning—a commons starts with an analysis of student needs and the kind of work they will be doing. That said, **the coordinating central unit might be an established facility like a library, equipment lab, or a familiar student gathering space, and the kinds of resources these units contain can be as varied as the needs they address**. The central unit is frequently a generous space furnished for informal face-to-face gatherings; other areas can include meeting rooms, writing centers, tutoring venues, advisor offices, and nearby access to food and drink. To reinforce that this is a student-centric area and to inspire the creativity of others, physical areas in the commons may also prominently display and promote student efforts. Student-generated artwork may appear on walls, while videos, essays, and music may be presented on other media.

3 Who’s doing it?

Numerous colleges and universities have adopted the learning commons approach, some with especially noteworthy results. The University of Dayton’s Ryan C. Harris Learning Teaching Center, for example, is designed to promote a culture of learning. Radiating from a large rotunda with space for gatherings and recitals, this bustling commons offers spaces for writing and research, educational technology, faculty development, and quiet scholarly

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reflection. Collaborative activities can take place in meeting rooms of all sizes, as themes of community and student support are played out in an e-learning center, new media lab, and coffee shop. The idea for one particularly noteworthy feature, an assistive technology lab for students with disabilities, is credited to the student for whom the center is named. At the D. H. Hill Library at North Carolina State University (NCSU), the learning commons is a lively interactive space with comfortable, inviting chairs, digital media lab, and spaces for group study. Not only can students there check out iPads, laptops, and other equipment, they can also check out video games. NCSU operates the Mobile Gaming Research Lab, and the ability to check out video games acknowledges both the increasing importance of games in education and the employment opportunities for graduates with local game companies.

4 Why is it significant?

As a place where students can meet, talk, study, and use “borrowed” equipment, **the learning commons brings together the functions of libraries, labs, lounges, and seminar areas in a single community gathering place.** This face-to-face forum supports the sharing of student ideas outside the classroom, complementing the shift in pedagogy toward collaborative media and team efforts. As a bonus, the learning commons can be an ideal venue to blend face-to-face with virtual meetings, allowing the broad population of students who commute or telecommute to join their teams in project discussions.

5 What are the downsides?

The initial drawback to a learning commons is its expense. **The cost of new equipment can be substantial, and legacy spaces may be difficult or costly to reconfigure.** In fact, designing, building, and maintaining a commons may be too big a project for a single organization or department and might require a collaborative effort among several campus entities.

Another often-encountered problem is that of choosing the right services to offer in a new commons. Since there is no single model of the ideal learning commons, it can be anything designers conceive to suit each institution’s unique needs and culture. This flexibility is an opportunity, but it also means institutions might have to “roll the dice” on some features based on their best guesses as to what will work well. Even then, when a commons is well designed and executed, the space can become a victim of its own success, with areas that are overcrowded, especially during peak periods. As a result, some have had to adopt scheduling procedures, making their gathering areas less available for just-in-time projects.

6 Where is it going?

The character of a learning commons demands that it change to meet the evolving needs of the students and the requirements of their academic work. Technological challenges on the horizon include increased mobile use, augmented-reality learning scenarios, and more touch- and gesture-based computing. These innovations mean that the commons as a physical space will be obliged to integrate even more of the virtual world into the face-to-face environment it now successfully provides. In such an environment, students might use mobile applications like Foursquare, a location-based social networking site, to reserve workspaces or resources. Or perhaps they will utilize interactive 3D displays to work with content in new ways. More assistive technology might become available, including haptic assistance for those with vision difficulties.

At the same time, **new and expanded partnerships across disciplines will facilitate and promote greater levels of collaboration in the learning commons.** New services will emerge, expanding the opportunities for new, highly effective learning activities.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

The commons is a gathering space for students, but it offers a great deal to the whole academic community. Campus resources like libraries, media labs, and experimental classrooms can be clustered in a single space, enabling students to make connections between them and direct their own learning. Faculty members can enjoy more flexibility in assigning projects because the commons offers spaces for work to be done either individually or collaboratively, with media support or without. Perhaps most importantly, **the commons invites students to devise their own approaches to their work and to transfer what they learn in one course to the work they do for another.** A well-equipped learning commons says to a student, “Here you have tools, room to collaborate, equipment, advice, research options, and access to expert information. Now it is up to you to build something worthwhile: a paper, a presentation, an education.”

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