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Introducing Learning Commons Functionality into a Traditional Reference Setting

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Abstract

For the past decade the University Libraries at The University of Akron has been modifying and enhancing its services in response to changing technologies and user needs, as well as evolving campus strategies. Library efforts centered on service excellence and student success have played a leading role in the inclusion of a planned learning commons as one of the key strategic initiatives of the University. At this time the learning commons concept has been fully developed, while the proposed building renovation plan is underway. The Library, however, is utilizing key opportunities in the present to integrate learning commons functionality into its existing reference service. This article is intended as a resource to other reference departments also in the midst of planned learning commons or that are aspiring to incorporate some aspects of commons service models into their existing services.

Background

The University of Akron (UA) is a comprehensive teaching and research university centrally located in the metropolitan Akron area in northeast Ohio. The University Libraries (UL) has a strong tradition of innovation and leadership in providing services to its users. Bierce Library, as the major main campus library, is the center of teaching and learning support for the largest percentage of UA students, faculty, and staff.

Recent changes at Bierce include the addition of a coffee shop adjacent to the circulation and reference areas and the relocation of various campus service units, including technology and academic support services, to the library building. The presence of these campus support units has provided opportunities to work collaboratively in providing essential student services. Knowledge gained through these collaborative efforts has facilitated the learning commons planning process, which began with a suggestion to campus administrators from the Dean of University Libraries and an initial learning commons concept developed by the Bierce Library Reference Department in 2005.

In its report—*Learning Commons Concept*—the Bierce Library Reference Department described a student-centered learning commons where the expertise of numerous campus specialists is available in a highly collaborative, integrated learning environment—a physical space in the Bierce Library dedicated to meeting the rapidly changing needs of students and faculty in a “one-stop-shopping” experience (Franks & Tosko 2007, p.114). This report was used to describe the concept to campus administrators, whose favorable response prompted the creation of a campus level planning team. The planning team, in conjunction with an independent consultant, the UL, and personnel from key campus support units further refined the overall configuration of learning commons services, producing a final proposal and building renovation plan for Bierce Library in early 2008.

As in other commons models, the proposal, which awaits final approval and funding, calls for the integration of reference, technical, and academic support services in a technology rich teaching and learning environment. With a belief that some aspects of the overall concept and proposal can and should be implemented in the present, the Reference Department is moving expeditiously toward integrating learning commons functionality into its existing reference model.

Steps taken to date include:

- Blending information and reference service at a single service point
- Expanding and clarifying reference service roles
- Implementing an instant messaging (IM) reference service
- Weeding print index and reference collections to create space
- Adding collaborative workstations and study space to the reference area
- Integrating other campus services into the reference process

Blending Information and Reference to Simplify Service for Library Users

While the professional literature describes various service and staffing configurations, and presents discussions in which the value of reference service is questioned altogether, Bierce reference librarians have historically maintained a steady course toward increasing the value of its existing reference service. This service is based upon a loosely defined tiered model similar to those described in much of the literature. A recent discussion of the tiered model and its place in the present reference environment can be found in *Tiered Reference: The New Landscape of the Frontlines* (Gardner 2006).

A second aspect of the existing reference model had been its separate information and reference service desks, where different levels of staff attempted to provide distinct types of services. This model, however, never truly functioned as intended. For example, most users failed to make a distinction between the two service points and their intended purpose. Consequently, library users presented all manner of queries at both desks, prompting even the best trained student assistants to respond to rather than refer reference questions, while frustrated reference librarians grappled with repetitive, often very simple technical problems. Further, as is the case with other academic library reference services, the number of queries requiring the specialized skill of a reference librarian have decreased in recent years while those requiring technical assistance, such

as with software applications, networked printers, electronic journals, and courseware, have increased sharply.

Librarians have discussed these issues profusely. In response, many libraries have addressed the increased need for technical assistance by integrating reference and technical assistance together at a single service point, often in a commons environment. In their discussion of a new service model at the University of California's Leavey Library, in which computing and reference assistance have been integrated, Crockett, McDaniel, and Remy (2002) succinctly summarized the major commons models that have been implemented.

In a similar manner and with similar goals in mind, the Bierce Reference Department eliminated its information desk and consolidated services at a single service point, where reference, informational, and basic technical assistance is available. In keeping with its tiered philosophy the new service point is staffed by a combination of librarians, support staff, and student assistants. Activity at the desk is directed by the librarian according to a set of clearly defined roles and standards.

Reference Service Roles: Clarifying Who Does What

Consolidating services at a single service point required a new staffing model, redefined reference provider roles, and implementation of the following recommendations:

- The consolidated service point should be staffed with a combination of support staff, librarians, and student assistants
- A minimum of one librarian should be available there at all times
- Student assistants should be given a clearly defined set of responsibilities
- It is imperative that librarians and staff share in the responsibility of monitoring and directing student assistant activities at the desk

The primary role of the librarian at the new combined service point is to assist users with research and complex information issues; however, as one of the major objectives of integrating services is to reduce obstacles for users, there are no rigid rules prohibiting librarians from assisting users with other needs. In other words, it is the librarian's choice whether good service in a given instance entails delegating a query or not. As the chief authority there, the librarian is responsible for ensuring that service proceeds as efficiently as possible. It is also the librarian's responsibility to supervise and direct the activities of others and provide support, assistance, and training to both support staff and student assistants when needed.

The role of support staff is similar to that of reference librarians. They may respond to all manner of queries, using sound judgment in referring reference questions to librarians. In the same manner as librarians and with the same service goals in mind, staff play a major role in directing and monitoring the activities of student assistants and in providing ongoing training at the desk.

Reference student assistants are viewed as an extension of librarians and staff, providing a wide range of assistance in areas that do not necessarily require librarian or staff expertise (See Appendix). They receive intensive initial training in basic informational, technical, and customer

service areas. As described above, in order to reinforce students' initial training, as well as important aspects of their overall role, librarians and support staff are encouraged to provide ongoing on-site training with real life and real time user transactions as lesson material.

Several articles have described state-of-the-art training programs for student assistants in reference. Henning (2000) provided an historical summary of student assistant utilization in academic libraries and insight into their expanding role in the electronic environment, while Borin (2001), Neuhaus (2001), and others have reported on detailed sample training programs. Like most academic libraries the UL relies heavily upon its student employees and considers training paramount to their continued effectiveness and success. Finally, clarifying roles has helped all reference providers to be more effective in the context of the new service model.

To date noted advantages of the blending of services are:

- Eliminates the duplication of effort between personnel at separate desks
- Provides a range of personnel in one location whose abilities span the scope of queries received
- Provides opportunities to improve reference accuracy as librarians monitor and intervene with student assistant reference interactions
- Increases cost effectiveness of personnel utilization as librarians respond primarily to in-depth reference questions, while staff and students provide most informational and technical assistance
- Increases availability of librarians for information literacy and subject liaison activities
- Facilitates the coordination user assistance, the supervision and education of student assistants, collaboration in the provision of service

IM Reference Service: Another Access Point

Another aspect of meeting the needs of today's students is to provide service access points that they will use. Virtual reference services, such as chat and IM are just two examples of user driven shifts in the traditional reference paradigm. In *Reinventing Library Buildings and Services for the Millennial Generation*, Richard Sweeney describes the Millennial cohort and their expectations. Two of these expectations are more choices and instant gratification (Sweeney 2005, p.167). Sweeney suggested that the library lesson is that successful library hours and service availability must be based upon Millennial needs, not the convenience of library staff. Libraries have only recently begun to improve user time savings and time shifting through such services as remote online journals, databases, e-books, and remote reference assistance. Delayed service is poor service (Sweeney 2005, p.168).

According to old ways of thinking it would be easy to dismiss this large group of users as lazy or unwilling to do or go where service is provided, but in a consumer driven culture such as ours, it makes sense to provide the types of services that our users expect and want. Maintaining a virtual reference service is absolutely necessary to reach the current generation of users. The expansion of this concept to include texting and access points in Web-based personal utilities such as Facebook and MySpace is further evidence that virtual reference is very much a consumer driven commodity.

In an effort to reach more students and provide yet another access point to reference service i.e., another choice for its Millennial students, the Reference Department implemented an IM reference service at the beginning of fall semester 2006. The service is intended for brief questions of a general nature. It is conducted from the reference desk and offered all hours that a librarian is present, which, during fall and spring semesters, amounts to seventy-two hours per week. The service can be brought online at any of the four desk workstations and while students can monitor the traffic, it is usually a librarian or staff member who responds to the message. While instant gratification is the most frequent outcome, referral of more in-depth problems is unavoidable. Technical queries requiring specialized assistance are referred to an Information Technology Services (ITS) support unit, commonly known as the computer help desk, while those requiring in-depth reference assistance are referred to subject specialist librarians via subject resource Web pages.

An Aggressive Weeding Project Creates Space

In their discussion of the information center at the Mansfield Library, University of Montana, Samson and Oelz described a process of relocating collections and condensing a traditional hard copy reference collection in order to focus on a rapidly expanding electronic reference collection and free up space for additional workstations, which were ultimately placed near a service point that provides technical, reference, and instruction services (Samson & Oelz 2005). Other libraries have undertaken similar projects and Bierce Library is no exception.

Beginning with a general rule of subscribing to online versions of reference tools when available and limiting the amount of time a given print resource may remain on the shelf, the Reference Department undertook a four-year long project to create space for additional workstations. A revised reference weeding policy facilitated the process of determining what and when to weed, while UA's membership in the OhioLINK consortium provided access to a wide array of shared online journals, e-books, images, and databases. A remote storage facility for seldom used print items provides an additional alternative for weeded items. This project has freed up space formally occupied by twelve rows of reference and index stacks in an area of approximately 1,044 square feet.

Adding Collaborative Workstations and Study Space

In Bierce, as in other similar libraries, demand for reference area workstations increased along with the use and popularity of the Internet, online databases and journals, courseware, electronic reserves, e-mail and instant messaging, and entertainment and personal Web space. By fall semester 2004 the reference area's thirty-six workstations were frequently fully occupied throughout the day. The configuration of these workstations, however, was not conducive to group research. In fact, workstation space scarcely accommodated the books, paper, and belongings of one individual. Students working in groups, therefore, preferred to check out one or more of the library's one-hundred-fifty wireless laptops. High demand for laptops, as evidenced by maximum usage at peak times of day, also seemed to indicate a need for more computers, but why collaborative workstations?

The literature provides evidence of the benefits of collaborative learning and describes how libraries have created environments that facilitate it. Oblinger (2005, as cited in Barton & Weismantel 2007) effectively stated the rationale for collaborative work space, while Barton and Weismantel (2007), Malefant (2006), and others have described individual library experiences. Ultimately, however, direct observation provided additional evidence to support the creation of such a work space in Bierce.

Once a substantial amount of space had been created by weeding the reference and index collections, several study tables were brought in to fill the space. Students began using these tables immediately, both for individual and group study, often gathering around a laptop computer. The configuration—tables grouped together in an open area adjacent to workstations and reference assistance—along with the way in which students utilized the space, resembled similar spaces in existing learning commons. With collaborative learning as a key aspect of the learning commons concept, and librarians fully engaged in the planning process, it wasn't long before the UL recognized the added value that collaborative workstations would bring to the reference program. Key aspects of the completed project, a joint effort of the Library, ITS, and Capital Planning include:

- Twenty additional workstations located in an area where students have shown a preference to work
- An attractive, open environment where friends and classmates can locate one another
- Ergonomically efficient workstation furniture with space enough for groups of two, three, or four students to work together
- Workstations configured to allow easy pass through and walk around by students and service providers
- Nearby networked printers
- Nearby study tables provide space for follow-up group work
- Informational, reference, and technical assistance is available at the adjacent reference service point
- Student assistants acting as peer helpers offer assistance from a post in the new area and by walking through the workstation area

Integrating Other Campus Service Units into Reference Service

The presence of other campus services within the library building and the synergistic relationships that have developed from their presence are key aspects of learning commons functionality that can be incorporated into the existing reference model.

ZipSupport

Although not yet located adjacent to or at the information/reference desk, ZipSupport, a key component of Technology Learning Support Services under the umbrella of ITS, has maintained a satellite computer help desk on the ground floor of Bierce Library since 2001. Here students and information/reference providers can access technical assistance most of the 102.5 hours of weekly library operation. Among the services it provides are assistance with the following frequent needs:

- Resolving network ID and passwords problems
- Troubleshooting university e-mail issues
- Configuring personal laptops for the campus wireless network and library networked printers
- Assisting with lost data, corrupted storage devices, and other retrieval problems
- Providing advice with remote authentication to off-campus users
- Assisting users with Springboard courseware

In the envisioned commons service model help desk and reference personnel will work side-by-side at a single central service point to provide a seamless reference experience for library users. Its presence in the library already facilitates the quick resolution of critical service problems that reference librarians once struggled with. For instance, prior to the relocation of this unit, students who encountered ID and password problems were required to interrupt their research and travel across campus to obtain assistance. Interrupted reference transactions resulted in discontinuity and frustration for library users and reference providers. Reference providers and support desk personnel are now able to coordinate services and resolve service problems expeditiously.

Student Academic Success

UA's University College offers an assemblage of academic support services designed to ensure student success. Some of these services have recently relocated to a renovated space in Bierce Library, where they are now called Student Academic Success (SAS). Services available there include:

- Writing Lab
- Mathematics Lab
- Tutorial Services

These services provide support to students who need supplementary instruction in General Education courses and other first and second year subject areas. The additional support is provided by faculty and certified tutors at no additional cost to the student. It is hoped that the location and availability of these programs within the library will increase the likelihood that students will seek out and use both SAS and library services. A transition team has implemented steps to ensure that service providers make students aware of the totality of services available in the building.

For example, if during a reference transaction it becomes evident that a given student is in need of additional help with a subject or course, reference providers now refer these students to SAS. Students who are being tutored in SAS are referred to reference providers or the computer help desk for assistance with research or computing needs. While this situation provides the student with convenience, it may also instill a sense that the University is a place where help of all kinds is available, and where employees work together to ensure their academic success. The amount of foot traffic into and out of the renovated space now occupied by SAS would seem to indicate heavy use of these services.

Bierce Library Coffee Shop

While the presence of a coffee and an assortment of other food and beverage products might not seem necessary to the learning process, the overwhelming popularity of the coffee shop as a place for faculty and students to meet and study is undeniable. At the same time, the Library has no prohibitive food or drink policy; thus library users may take their coffee shop purchases anywhere within the library. This has added another aspect of comfort and convenience to the library experience without notable damage to library equipment and has increased the learning commons feel of existing library space.

Summary

While awaiting approval and funding of the learning commons proposal, the Reference Department has implemented measures to integrate learning commons functionality into existing reference services. Acting upon as many aspects of the commons model as possible has resulted in a more seamless, fluid service to library users and has helped cultivate effective working relationships with ITS and SAS campus units that will eventually be present at the learning commons. These innovations will raise awareness of services, better fulfill essential user needs, and contribute to a better understanding of the learning commons model and the new paradigms it will bring.

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Appendix

Reference Student Assistant Duties

- Demonstrate and conduct basic online catalog searches
- Demonstrate and conduct basic topical searches in online databases
- Demonstrate basic navigation of library Web pages to find appropriate subject databases, services, and personnel
- Demonstrating basic navigation of university Web pages to locate services and departments, look up course schedules, register for classes, print out schedules and grades, etc.
- Answering service point telephones and monitor incoming instant messages, referring reference questions as appropriate to librarians and staff
- Assist users with directional and general informational queries
- Assist users with network printers and other machinery
- Troubleshoot network printers and other equipment; report malfunctions as necessary
- Accompany users to the stacks to locate books, journals, government documents, and other materials
- Assist with workstation logins and interpreting desktop menus
- Refer login, password, and other network problems to the ZipSupport computer help desk
- Various duties relating to the basic functioning of the reference area.