

Valparaiso University

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The Information Commons Service Model: Off the Map and Through the Rapids

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The Information Commons *Service Model*: Off the Map and Through the Rapids ACRL 12th National Conference, April 2005

Proposal abstract

Just as good captains rely on maps when guiding their ships in unfamiliar territory, so can we chart our own courses from others' work in exploring variants of the information commons model. Here at Valparaiso University, we rejected the idea of an "information commons area" separated from traditional library services and resources when designing our new building. Joining with our campus IT User Services colleagues and the Writing Center, we consider our model to be an attitude of service that encompasses our organization and includes the entire building. We purposefully include print and electronic resources together throughout the building with different types of service desks on separate floors. Creating this new facility provided the opportunity for us to consider change, but as evidenced in our model, new space isn't always necessary. Collegiality with patron-centered customer service is our essential component.

We believe the mix of resource formats and service areas on every floor emphasizes to students that all formats and services have roles to play in their research. In many ways, though, those of us staffing the building are keeping traditional roles. Reference Librarians and their student assistants are at their desk on one floor. On another floor, however, IT professionals and their student assistants combine their efforts with library media and circulation services to provide assistance. Our view of the entire building as one information-providing facility encourages staff from any department to go to anywhere the student needs assistance. Further supporting IT's place as an academic unit, library and IT administration are also sharing office space. When bringing both units together under one roof, we considered issues such as core knowledge and training, hours of operation, student assistant job descriptions, codes of conduct and dress, and hiring and firing practices.

Our collaboration with IT isn't tied simply to the building. Working relationships over the past six years have heightened our collegiality, and exemplify the "information commons as a service attitude" model prior to our shared spaces. We first proved to ourselves that the people-side of this dynamic could work; this then made the concept of common workspaces easy to adopt. And while our cross-training focuses on essential core knowledge and referral skills, keeping our traditional roles allows the experts to do what they do well rather than develop a service staff that attempts to be all things to all people and not do any of it well. Patrons who can't be helped at one desk will be referred directly to an identified expert, not shuttled endlessly along.

By sharing our year-long outcomes with this service model and provoking candid discussions concerning its workability, we will empower our audience to provide similar grassroots leadership for collaboration on their campuses. Visual and documentary support (photographs, charts, and handouts) will enhance this session but the primary goal is to promote conversations among attendees on this “new” twist to one of today’s top issues in the academic library community.

Session display notes

Simply put, an **Information Commons**

- integrates traditional reference services with large-scale technology access
- supports a dedicated staff
- offers collaborative workspaces

When implemented as a service model and applied to an entire building at Valparaiso University, everyone benefits: library services, IT services, the Writing Center, the Teaching Resource Center, our campus, and community.

Reflections

- How do we holistically support VU’s mission?
- How do we further campus collegiality?
- How do we involve all constituents in planning?
- How do we emphasize and support use of resources in all formats?
- How do we increase ease of resource use for patrons?
- What campus units and services benefit users within a collaborative space?
- How are those units already working together?
- How do we best support shared help desks yet respect specialists’ expertise?

Considerations

- Strategic planning for new building offers opportunity for various model considerations.
- Thoughtful study of student, faculty, and staff behaviors and requests is crucial.

- Previous staff collaborations between library, IT, Writing Center, and Teaching Resource Center impact ease of common workplace discussions.
- Strategic placement of offices, services, and resources allows for easy user assistance.
- Service style encourages staff specialists to go to the student.
- Keeping core traditional roles allows experts to do what they do best.
- Mix of resource formats and service areas on every floor emphasizes that all have roles to play in research.
- Wireless technology throughout supports various work and research styles.

Results

- Granted, a new building will attract patrons but this service style makes them repeat customers.
- All services and resources report increased use:
 - Fall door count: ↑ 433%
 - Fall instruction sessions: ↑ 22%
 - Interlibrary loan requests: ↑ 27%
 - Circulating collection use: ↑ 9%
- Higher visibility of the EIS Help Desk (IT) contributed to increased number of help requests and resolutions.
- The Writing Center's proximity to research and productivity resources also provides quick access to peer tutors and assistance.
- Combined Fall Welcome Program (for freshmen) allows the library, IT, and Writing Center staffs increased contact with students
- Building-use by campus survey currently underway
- The Teaching Resource Center and Faculty Study provide faculty a "space of their own," increased programming, and dedicated technology resources.

Patron sense of building ownership is dynamic:

- faculty hold office hours
- entire classes use various reading and lounge areas
- solid budget support of all services and resources
- library and IT collaborations increasing, also on social level
- local area and community use markedly increased

Conclusions

- The Information Commons model can be successful as a service style.
- Sharing core knowledge and referral skills encourages professional respect and patron-centric service.
- Model doesn't require new physical construction to be effective.
- Previous collaborative experiences between the library, IT, and the Writing Center formed our true cornerstone.
- Success of first year provides baseline for future plans:
 - increased staff cross-training
 - complimentary student assistant job descriptions and expectations
 - more shared programming opportunities

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