Learning Commons Vision, Overview, and Proposed Phases[1]

Library & Learning
October 2023

Vision and Overview

1. Project Background and Description

In August 2019, President Davenport encouraged the university community to consider a "Library of the Twenty-First Century." The effort, subsequently dubbed the "Library of the Future," has been advanced through subsequent organizational changes, visioning, discussions, and department or program-level strategic planning and collaboration. The work has resulted in the development of digital and physical Learning Commons concepts, the latter of which is proposed on the main floor of Memorial Library in the form of collaborative academic learning services whose main purpose is to advance student engagement, retention, and completion by normalizing academic support.

In AY 2021-22 the interim Dean and the Library & Learning leadership team charged a workgroup to investigate the literature, themes, and models for Learning Commons. The work group determined that Learning Commons have existed for more than a decade, but that substantive efforts to improve coordination of such services are recently emerging on campuses throughout the country. The literature demonstrated learning commons concepts emerged from converging needs and challenges. First, services in the library and across campus can be difficult to locate and overwhelming to approach. Making these resources approachable and easy to navigate leads to student success. Secondly, staffing and budgetary demands, expanding responsibilities, university priorities, and new service offerings drive the need for creative solutions while still offering exemplary, efficient, and personalized service to students. Documented benefits of learning commons include broadening the role of the library, collaboration across campus student learning services, and transformative change in learning and help-seeking behavior.[2]

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[1] This is an updated document originally presented in April 2023 to the Joint Budget, Planning, and Assessment Committee. Our communication framework was adapted with permission from West Virginia University's publication "WVU Libraries Research Services Committee Research Commons Vision" (December 18, 2017). https://researchcommons.lib.wvu.edu/files/d/cf965a86-f1fc-4029-a917-deb58c5f3a9d/research-commons-vision-report-december-2017.pdf.

[2] As one scholar wrote about learning commons, "[their] mission [is] not merely to integrate technology, reference … and services but to facilitate learning by whatever means works best. As a library service environment, the Learning Commons will enable students to develop a framework to understand and evaluate the impact of information technology on the choices they make as researchers and practitioners." See D.A. Nitecki, "Space assessment as a venue for defining the academic library," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 81 (2011): 27–59.

As a result of their research, the workgroup recommended developing a suite of learning services focusing on academic student success designed for intentional collaboration that makes help-seeking behavior typical, easy, and intuitive for all students. The recommended model includes a centralized help/information desk to connect students seamlessly to several academic learning services which for most of the institution's history have operated in relative isolation from one another.

This work advances or complements many developing campus and department strategic plans, including the new Armstrong Hall II proposal; Equity 2030; the emerging strategic goals of offering transformative learning experiences, creating a community of care focused on equity and inclusion, and effective stewardship of resources; as well as Library Services' stated goals to "Enhance access to library resources and services to meet the needs of a diverse student body" by developing and implementing collaborative services models that advance student learning.

In AY '23, the Provost's Office requested that Library & Learning more deeply engage potential partners throughout and beyond the division to envision ways in which a Learning Commons can support the academic learning services needs of the campus. We were asked to investigate potential services, partnerships, levels of engagement, and facility needs.

2. Example Institutions

The work group initially began its work by identifying some example institutions to interview and visit.[3] An asterisk means we have physically visited the university sites. Provost Hood visited CSU, East Bay, and four teams composed of members of Library Services, IT Solutions, MavPASS, the Center for Academic Success, and the Undergraduate Research Center visited North Carolina State, the University of Arizona, University of Miami, and University of Saskatchewan in May and June 2023.

- **Black Hills State University** recently renovated an existing building, creating the E.Y. Berry Library-Learning Center, which responds to new learning needs by incorporating a student success center, including advising, tutoring, math and writing, an IT help desk, a café, and expanded study areas alongside traditional access and research support services.

- **California State University, East Bay*** constructed the CORE building incorporates Library Services and a centralized information point alongside research support, student collaboration zones, innovation labs, and the Student Center for Academic Achievement. President Inch helped to develop the facility. We interviewed the dean and librarians, and Provost Hood recently visited the facility.

- **North Carolina State University*** created a learning commons in its D.H. Hill Jr. Library that offers an academic success center offering a variety of tutoring, supplemental instruction, drop

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[3] Large R1 schools were on our radar because they had the resources to construct their commons <u>and</u> the ability to promote them via conference presentations and publications. Regional comprehensive universities have been slower to move in this direction, and with less thought to a coordinated vision for student learning services support. We may also investigate innovative developments among community colleges.

in academic and career counseling, wellness coaching, and undergraduate research services. Another floor offers popular reading, data visualization, engineering, makerspace, and digital media production workstations.

- **Seattle University** developed an early manifestation of a Learning Commons over a decade ago. The Commons includes research services, learning assistance programs, a writing center, math lab, and media production center. In a series of interviews, the dean indicated that they are embarking on another stage of integration by further coordinating their student-facing services.

- **University of Arizona*** recently completed a major renovation of parts of two existing libraries and a gym to create a Student Success District. This large project, which occupies the equivalent of a city block, incorporates a suite of academic success/learning services, research support, technology, and innovation studios, advising, and collaborative research and experiential learning spaces. Arizona library leadership has been generous in sharing information and spending time with us.

- **University of Miami*** (FL) recently renovated their Richter Library to incorporate a learning commons, including a coordinated help/information desk, research support, tutoring, data visualization, language labs, academic enhancement services, IT support, and advising, among other services.

- **University of Saskatchewan*** offers perhaps the most philosophically advanced collaborative model we identified. They offer commons atmospheres in multiple libraries, including a "learning hub." Murray Library offers research, writing, math, and statistics assistance, in addition to IT help and a digital research center.

The library learning commons we studied and visited all emphasized community, the joy of reading, inquiry, and a passion for life-long learning, and included a variety of spaces for reading and student study. Library websites, for example, incorporated information about learning services, including their locations, hours, means of making appointments, and calendars of activities. Learning services frequently hosted workshops especially to student learning needs. All Learning Commons offered technology assistance and technology spaces that fostered creativity and innovation. Learning Commons models used flexible study environments that catered to a variety of activities, from 1:1 assistance to small group work in a variety of collaboration spaces. Many areas included comfortable seating and cafés while utilizing their environments to encourage reading and information-seeking behaviors that are hallmarks of student success. Learning Commons generally buzz with activity and planful libraries included other spaces for more solitary study. See appendix 1 for further insights.

3. Campus Partner Conversations

Library & Learning facilitated two rounds of campus partner conversations. In Spring 2022, the Collaborative Services Workgroup[4] engaged in research and discussions that resulted in a literature review and a list of desirable attributes of Learning Commons.[5]

In Spring 2023, Library & Learning purposefully expanded campus discussions to include as wide a range of areas as feasible under time and personnel restraints. In this round we also specifically worked with student groups.

Stakeholders were provided a recorded video of Chris Corley and Casey Duevel presenting workgroup findings and commons themes among Learning Commons, and then they were invited to meetings and asked to submit feedback in writing via an online form. To accommodate the limited time, we had available with students, we provided them with a student-oriented version of the presentation.

Questions for Stakeholder Meetings:

- Would your area be interested in participating in future discussions about collaborative learning services, or a learning commons? If so, who would serve as your key contact partner?
- What about this collaborative service model interests you? Overall, how could a model like this impact student success?
- What about this collaborative service model concerns you? What challenges do you see in this vision?
- How do you believe this model could benefit the students, particularly first generation and underrepresented students?
- What do you think a learning commons model for a digital component should/would look like?
- The workgroup has proposed a central help desk (which in Library Services is sometimes called a tiered, or triage, desk) for the hypothetical learning commons. What functions could you see this type of central desk performing, and why?
- Do you have any other thoughts about the conceptual model proposed by the workgroup?

The following groups were interviewed and/or submitted written feedback:
Within Library & Learning, we developed further meetings specifically with the Center for Academic Success, TRIO Student Support Services, and MavPASS. We met with several teams within Library Services including Archives and Special Collections, Public Access Team, Reference and Instruction, Technical and Collection Services, Systems, and, to make sure that every library staff member was accommodated, we also met with the Library Paraprofessional Organization.

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[4] Casey Duevel (Library Services), Jason Westman (Center for Academic Success), Michael Gutiérrez (Library Services), Matt Clay (IT Solutions), Jonathan Paver (Extended Campus), Anna McGuire (Library Services), Justine Martin (Library Services), Margaret Hesser (TRIO), Annalis Luck (Library Services), Emma Morin (Honors), Jennifer Turner (Library Services), Breanna Perron (Learning Communities GA/Student), Oscar Gonzalez (Accessibility Resources)

[5] Available upon request.

Beyond Library & Learning, we engaged with the Accessibility Office, Career Development Center, CETL, Counseling Center, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, IT Solutions, RASP, Student Success Services, and University Advising.

We specifically engaged students through sections of ENG 101, Student Government, Honors Student Board, MavPASS Leaders, and the Learning Community Coordinators.

We received over 30 documents containing both group and individual responses. In total, we identified 340+ distinct points that had been articulated, of which 210 came from individual comments, and 130 from group feedback.

Common themes
- *Student Use*: Students might be more likely to use the services if they were easily available in a learning commons environment. Students we engaged with showed great enthusiasm for the concept, even knowing that it will take some time to develop and implement, they expressed excitement for future Mavericks.
- *Student Success*: Most discussants identified ways in which a learning commons concept would further student success initiatives, either because of visibility, ease of use, or by creating pathways for student success, or by utilizing wayfinding and referrals from one service to another.
- *Partnerships*: Many areas indicated potential forms of partnerships through one of three approaches: permanent physical partnership, a digital partnership, or a "pop-up" partnership, with a partner utilizing physical space to promote an activity at times of the year.
- *Collaboration*: Many discussants focused on the potential for collaboration, including offering new digital and physical services and resources ideas. A few focused on the concept of collaboration as a recruitment tool for potential students and employees.
- *Information (or Triage) Desk/Service Point*: Most discussants were supportive of a centralized information point (in Library Services this is sometimes called a "triage" desk), although there was uncertainty about whether students or trained professionals should staff it.
- *Implementation*: There were many questions about how this would be implemented, or how it would generally work. Questions included scheduling, staffing optimization, marketing, and the varieties of spaces needed to perform specialized work, especially work related to 1:1 faculty/staff work with students.

Implementation obstacles and concerns
- *Institutional Alignment*. How does this plan align with other university initiatives and plans?
- *Commons Design*: How do we design spaces specific enough for planned use, yet flexible enough for change? How do we create spaces for "drop-in" style activities versus those that require sensitivity and confidentiality? How do we balance a variety of activities that can take place in open areas, versus those that cannot? What impact might decisions made concerning Armstrong II, or the main floor, have on other areas of the building?

- *Commons Service Model and Philosophy*: What overall digital and physical service model should define the proposed activity? How might we build upon decades-long expertise among library workers in planning, testing, and adapting spaces for collections, services, and study?
- *Decision-making*. What is the library faculty's role in making recommendations regarding library spaces, and how do we account for perspectives across departments, programs, and divisions? Once a Learning Commons is established, how are effective decisions made concerning spaces and services? Should we create a multidisciplinary board or leadership team?
- *Communication and Relationships*: How will decisions and policies be effectively developed and communicated? What relationships will exist among potential partners? What will ensure healthy communication between Library Services staff who have had long-standing responsibilities for maintaining the facility, ensuring accessibility, and protecting physical materials, and new partners working within the facility?
- *Prioritization*. With uncertain changes ahead related to Armstrong Hall II planning, and limited space available on the main floor, how do we prioritize which learning services we want available on the main floor, and why?
- *Timelines*. What are the anticipated timelines? Which activities should occur when?

Suggestions for primary partners
Primary partners were identified through research on existing commons models, outreach, conversations, and an indication of interest. In some cases (for example Accessibility Services, University Advising, TRIO Student Support Services), partners have very specific needs for 1:1 private advising that may be challenging to accommodate within a main floor Learning Commons environment. On the other hand, drop-in assistance might be accommodated in a public location.

- Accessibility Services
- Center for Academic Success
- IT Solutions
- Library Services
- MavPASS
- Printing Services
- TRIO: Student Support Services
- Undergraduate Research Center
- University Advising
- University Fellowships Office[6]

Suggestions for potential digital/pop-up partners (occasional outreach, student referrals)

- Career Development Center
- Counseling Center
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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[6] We have not yet formally connected with Printing Services and those responsible for English Language Learning.

- Honors Program
- Learning Communities
- Student Success Services

Faculty-Oriented Partnerships Beyond the Scope of a Learning Commons

We suggest renewed consideration of an expanded, future-oriented faculty development/resource center. Since this work (instructional design, innovative pedagogies, grants, etc.) is not focused on direct services to students, we suggest the University community consider how this collaboration might be strengthened in other ways beyond the Learning Commons.

- Center for Academic Success
- Center for Excellence in Scholarship and Research (CESR)
- Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL)
- IT Solutions
- Library Services
- MavPASS
- Research and Sponsored Programs (RASP)
- Undergraduate Research Center

4. Phased Plan

Phase 1: Vision, Organizational Change, Study, and Preparation

Phase 1 has been developing since Fall 2019, when the Dean of Library & Learning position description changed. During this time,

- Both the President's and Provost's Offices actively encouraged the development of Library & Learning organizational models, and visions for a collaborative services Learning Commons.
- Library Services responded to the administration by developing a vision for a future library, engaging in program review, and developing a strategic plan in support of system and university goals.
- The Dean organized a new Library & Learning Leadership Team to develop a mission, vision, and goals for the organization, and to charge a workgroup to begin research on Learning Commons and digital collaborative spaces. Given the vast scope of both physical and digital spaces, the workgroup recommended focusing on the physical space first but understand the digital space is a critical component to follow.
- Library Services built upon historical collaboration with Printing Services, IT Solutions, and the Center for Excellence and Innovation by accommodating the growth in MavPASS staff and services, hosting a variety of sites for MavPods, re-evaluating use of computer stations, and experimenting with service points, including a tutoring site located behind the circulation desk.
- Library Services embarked upon a two-year deselection campaign to remove little-used General Collection physical materials to accommodate the Learning Commons and Armstrong II planning. This work is planned to be completed in Fall 2025. Deselection work also exists in various forms for the physical materials in other specialized collections.

- IT Solutions, Accessibility Services, the Center for Academic Success, University Advising, and the Dean's office collaborated on furniture and study space redesign in the lower level of the library.

In-Progress:
- Library Services is working with IT Solutions to test an IT Help Desk on the main floor of Memorial Library beginning in August 2023.
- The Dean's office sponsored virtual discussions with libraries across the country and several short study trips to model sites.
- **With this document, we are seeking to align a Learning Commons vision with University Planning; Budget; Assessment and Evaluation Committees; Academic Affairs, and Expanded Cabinet.**

Phase 2: Continued Testing and Developing a Common Service Philosophy
We recommend creating a workgroup consisting of members from the primary partners. The workgroup will:
- Define roles and establish expectations for learning commons partners (including various types of partnerships) and communications to and from their represented groups and/or bargaining units.
- Define patrons/clientele and explore the possibility of community partnerships.
- Continued investigation of learning commons models, including visiting learning commons which may not have worked, or are being reshaped. We might also include community college commons.
- Craft a vision and mission for the learning commons.
- Tie efforts to university and area strategic plans.
- Create a common service philosophy agreement.
- Create a partnership agreement.
- Agreed upon hours and staffing.
- Determine help/information desk service philosophy, naming, scope, potential staffing, and responsibility.
- Explore scalability and effectiveness of peer-to-peer models that can bridge the physical and digital campus.
- Determine functional name of the space and how it will be branded and communicated to the students.
- Work with University Advancement to explore fundraising and naming opportunities
- Begin usability testing on temporary learning commons ideas (Tutoring, IT Solutions, potentially the Info desk and/or reference services)
- Individual areas will need to be asked to review group outcomes and brainstorm the ways that their respective programs will staff the service area.
- Explore how our digital spaces and our Learning Commons collaboration work to ensure that our online tools offer a parallel service for our online and distance learners.

Phase 3
- Explore leadership and management needs for the learning commons and provide recommendations for any organizational changes.
- Work with architects and designers to mindfully plan and map out spaces and services that can adapt to changing student needs. Include green and eco-friendly initiatives.

Phase 4
- Launch learning commons
- Continue to gather feedback and revise models and services as appropriate.

5. Conclusion

For millennia, libraries have fostered learning through human connection, community, and the transfer of knowledge across space and time. In aligning collaborative learning services alongside traditional library attributes of accessible information and research points and study spaces, learning commons concepts build upon preexisting institutions and practices for a new generation of students.

Appendix 1: Executive Summary of Learning Commons Site Visits Best Practices

The following is an executive summary of collective findings from 10+ reports submitted following site visits to four model learning commons in May-June 2023.

Lessons for Student Success

- Our colleagues suggested literature that inspired them:
    - Research demonstrated that students' awareness and use of services were higher for permanently stationed services.[7]
    - "[…] Students benefit from many and varied experiences during college and that learning and personal development are cumulative, mutually shaping processes that occur over an extended period of time in many different settings. The more students are involved in a variety of activities inside and outside the classroom the more they gain. (para. 23)"[8]
- Our colleagues used clearly defined goals: For example, at Miami, students in the Learning Commons will be able to Access, Collaborate, Communicate, Create, Learn, Research, and Write
- Our colleagues reminded us that students don't care which departments offer services. They just want it available and easy to use.
- Our colleagues emphasized that the goal should be to normalize academic learning services usage as an essential component of being a student, much like using recreational facilities, the student union, or attending a sporting event.

Lessons for Participatory Planning

- Collaborate: bring together current and future partners prior to space design.
- Many stressed the need for IT support beyond hardware, especially for digital literacy and the development of foundational computer skills
- Hire a consultant/architect with library experience.
- Create a virtual commons that closely align with the physical commons
- Focus on partners, not tenants. Some campuses included areas that didn't feel like a partner but rather as if they are just sitting in a space. This was uncomfortable and ineffective. The learning commons should consist of true partners, not tenants.

Lessons for Location and Design

- Make things Immediately visible.
- Create a one-stop desk for directions, referrals, appointments, and circulation.
- Place a variety of services located near each other with easy handoffs or move staff from space to space as needed.

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[7] E. DeFrain, & M Hong, "Interiors, Affect, and Use: How Does an Academic Library's Learning Commons Support Students' Needs?" *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 15, no. 2 (2020), 42-69.

[8] M. T. Accardi, M. Cordova, and K. Leeder, "Reviewing the Library Learning commons: History, Models, and Perspectives," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 17, no. 2-3 (2010), 310-329.

- Make it feels like one support area, rather than several isolated areas.
- Create clear signage and space design (color-coded carpeting etc.)
- Use inviting, comfortable, movable furniture with a variety of study space options and flexible space designed into the plan.
- Use movable whiteboards and walls
- Use hoteling spaces for private conversations
- Include a coffee shop/café
- Highlight in recruitment and in admissions tours.

Lessons on Personnel

- Some institutions found success with positions dedicated to the Learning Commons, like a Learning Commons Director and/or Student Success Librarian or someone who is responsible for clear communication; coordinating and promoting the needs of collaborative partners; identifying challenges; coordinating shared software, space, staffing, and resources; identifying and creating more collaborations and partners; and campuswide promotion and support

Lessons on Specialized Spaces

- Create an Assistive Technology Room that includes accessibility equipment is in here. Students who work with accessibility services can use it. The accessibility center gives them the room code. There was no interaction with the library service desk.
- Create a Low Sensory Study space. Work with accessibility services and students to pick furniture and decide on colors, lighting, etc. The purpose is to prevent distractions and help students focus.
- Create a data visualization/experience center. Students do not know how to effectively work with data and create visualizations.
- Create spaces especially focused on high impact learning practices and innovative teaching techniques, and reserved only for those faculty who had completed training sessions.
- Create a late-night study space that can be closed off from the rest of the building, potentially staffed by trained students.
- Create an outdoor Patio Space as an extension of the Learning Commons.
- Use multiple entrances rather than a single entrance.