Commons Model In Libraries - Challenges & Successes

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Abstract

In the last few years academic libraries in the United States embraced the new *Commons* model, where each of these commons, such as learning commons, research commons, subject and format commons, etc., has its own specific characteristics and role within the library. However, this new trend mainly has been the result of increased reliance on electronic collections and increased need for collaborative work. Users want continuous access to all resources in a variety of locations, which is not always feasible due to resource and staffing limitations. To adapt to this new model, library spaces have been transformed to accommodate the needs for collaborative work. Additionally, staff skills and duties have also been transforming with librarians and support staff becoming partners in the research process as opposed to being transmitters of information. We will briefly discuss different commons models and give examples of challenges and successful space transformations. We will explore the skillsets of the new workforce needed for this new reality and the new positions in Libraries that are advertised. Like academic libraries, iSchools will have to adapt as well since this is where new members of the workforce are cultivated and educated. At the same time, professional development in the libraries is an important component of bringing current staff up to speed in the changing environment. We will also share our experience with implementing library commons and discuss the different commons that exist at the University of Maryland Libraries, such as the *Terrapin Learning Commons*, *Research Commons* and its subsidiaries *Research Commons @ EPSL* (Engineering and Physical Sciences Library) and *Research Commons @ MSPAL* (Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library), and *Media Commons*.

Introduction

There are many constants in the academic library, but libraries in higher education are constantly adapting to meet the ever-changing needs of their users, including faculty, students, and researchers. To meet the needs of their growing community of users, academic libraries have developed spaces in their facilities to reinforce collaborative and exploratory learning, typically referred to as commons. The rise of dedicated commons in academic libraries, new user-centered professional positions, and the introduction of innovative services for library users are just some examples of ways academic libraries are evolving to remain relevant on college and university campuses in the United States.

The main focus of this work will be on commons in libraries and the supporting elements of these spaces, such as librarian positions, emerging skills for library professionals, and services to support academic advancement. In this paper, we define commons in libraries as places of community in the academic institution. Our definition is informed by the Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) definition of common: "A common land or estate; the undivided land belonging to the members of a local community as a whole." Library commons are learning spaces for all members of the university or college community to explore new topics, develop new skills, and further their academic careers.

Commons as Learning-Centered Spaces

Academic libraries have traditionally been repositories of knowledge, housing collections to support the research and teaching needs of faculty and students. To complement libraries as places for collections, librarians have traditionally been the gatekeepers to these physical materials. Crosbie and Hickey (2001) assert that librarianship is one of "the only profession[s] that derives its name from a particular type of building, the library… Quite literally, a librarian is one who takes care of books in a building designed to store them" (p. 6). While librarians are still responsible for collections, these resources are increasingly accessed

virtually, with less physical space in the library housing bound periodicals, print monographs, and micro-format items. Librarianship has been reshaped as library collections and spaces have changed with the advent of online resources and home internet connections.

As more and more materials are available virtually, library users no longer need to come into a physical library to access many resources, but library spaces are at a premium. One reason for the increased need for library space by users is the rise in enrollments at higher education institutions. In the United States of America specifically, undergraduate and graduate enrollments in postsecondary institutions are at an all time high. Undergraduate enrollment increased by 30% between 2000 and 2015, while postbaccalaureate enrollment increased by 36% between 2000 and 2010 (McFarland et al., 2017). With more students coming to universities, libraries are adapting to meet the space and learning needs of their increasingly diverse populations through the use of commons.

One of the biggest changes to library space planning is how to foster learning in the library. In 2003, Scott Bennett published the report titled *Libraries Designed for Learning*, where the author envisions a new way of planning library spaces that is forward looking and innovative. As part of his research, Bennett (2003) interviewed library directors, including Jill Gemmels, College Librarian at Wartburg College, who said, "I think that libraries have tried to support learning, but I don't think libraries have traditionally said 'We want to make learning happen here'" (p. 3). At the heart of the various kinds of commons is the desire to move from just supporting learning through the collection of materials to engaging and fostering learning in library spaces and programs. Beth Holland (2015) observes, "Students and teachers no longer need a library simply for access. Instead, they require a place that encourages participatory learning and allows for co-construction of understanding from a variety of sources. In other words, instead of being an archive, libraries are becoming a learning commons."

While commons are learning-centered spaces at their core, there are various different kinds of commons that have been developed at various institutions in the United States. Below we will look at what commons are, in addition to being learning centered spaces, and some of the different functions of these spaces in academic libraries.

Commons: What are they and what do they do?

There are many different uses of the word "commons." Collections of literature, music, art, software, information, and other heritage items can be known as cultural or intellectual commons. Wikipedia is an example of this kind of "commons." There are also Digital Commons, which are proposed by Mayo Fustler Morell (2010) "as an information and knowledge resources that are collectively created and owned or shared between or among a community and that tend to be non-exclusivedible, that is, be (generally freely) available to third parties" (p. 5). Finally, there are Creative Commons, which are something librarians are very familiar with. These are copyright licenses and tools that provide more flexibility for use and reuse within the confines of traditional copyright restrictions.

Commons in academic libraries have many different elements that also set them apart as learning-centered spaces. According to Whitchurch (2010), "[Commons] as a physical space, combines technology service, and atmosphere to create a dynamic, comfortable, and collaborative educational environment. To accomplish this, it needs to be flexible and adaptable" (p. 41). These spaces typically have workspaces, including furniture that can easily be moved and reconfigured to meet the changing needs of the commons such as workshops, instruction, and individual study. These spaces may also include specialized software or technologies, which can be partnered with programming in the space to facilitate learning new skills. As broad as the word "commons" is, its iterations in libraries can be equally as extensive. Libraries can have various kinds of commons, depending on the services they wish to provide students. Some commons models have a specific discipline in mind, while others offer more commonly used technologies and services.

Learning Commons

Learning Commons can be loosely defined depending upon the university, but typically have some similar characteristics. Lippincott and Greenwell (2011) describe learning, or information, commons as "a full-service learning, research, and project space." (p. 1) Many services are geared towards undergraduates; two studies done by Sherman at North Carolina State University and Fuller at Southern Connecticut State University showed that implementing a learning commons in the library increased usage of the library, especially by undergraduates (Beagle, 2011). Many introductions written about existing learning commons incorporate the

words "technology" and "collaboration". According to Lippincott and Greenwell, "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" (2011, p. 1). Some examples of learning commons and their services:

- **The Reilly Learning Commons** at the University of Scranton houses secondary locations for the campus' Writing Center and Technology Support Center ("Reilly Learning Commons Opens in Library," 2014). The Reilly Learning Commons sought feedback regarding its space, and includes "student tested and approved" chairs ("Reilly Learning Commons Opens in Library," 2014).

- **UMass Amherst Learning Commons** partners with many different departments on its campus, including Information Technology (IT) User Services, IT Computer Classrooms, and the Assistive Technologies Center ("Learning Commons," n.d.).

- **Learning Commons @ Perry Library** at Old Dominion University is run by the University Libraries, the Information Technology Services, and the Center for High Impact Practices, who work together to provide writing services, tutoring, equipment loan, and reference support ("About the Learning Commons," 2016). The Learning Commons also has an Innovation Lab, featuring recording/editing software, and a student practice presentation space ("About the Learning Commons," 2016).

- **The University of Miami Libraries' Learning Commons** collaborated with the Camner Academic Resource Center, Academic Technologies, Writing Center, and Math Lab to create an environment in which "students in all disciplines pursue their own intellectual goals in conversation with peers and experts and with access to scholarly and creative resources" ("About the Commons," n.d.). The area also includes a Writing Center, Digital Media Lab, GIS Lab, and a Student Technology Help Desk ("UML Learning Commons," n.d.).

Research/Scholars Commons

Research or scholars/scholarly commons typically have a lot of features of learning commons, but are more focused on offering support for the entire researching lifecycle, from initial ideas to publication. Research commons services, which can include individual research consultations, specialized software, and data preservation, are marketed more towards graduate students and faculty (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013). Examples of research commons and their services:

- **Scholarly Commons** at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign wants to enable it users "to pursue research and receive expert copyright, data, digital humanities, digitization, scholarly communications, and usability consultation services" and updates a blog entitled "Commons Knowledge," which examines new services/technologies and researching issues ("About Us," n.d.).

- **Scholars' Commons** at Indiana University Bloomington "supports the journey from curiosity to discovery to publication" and encourages any researcher to utilize its services, although they do tailor them towards graduate students and faculty ("Scholars' Commons," n.d.).

- **Scholars Commons** at Florida State University Libraries has reserved areas for faculty and graduate students, including study space and computer labs, and offers statistical consulting and graduate writing assistance ("About Us," n.d.).

Subject/Format Commons

Subject, or format, commons also include the features of learning and research commons, but are usually dedicated to a subject or format. At the University of Maryland, satellite commons are found in the Engineering and Physical Sciences Library (Research Commons @ EPSL), the upcoming commons at the Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library (Research Commons @ MSPAL), and Library Media Services (Media Commons), which are discussed below.

New Challenges and Opportunities

Transforming Library Spaces

The different kinds of commons highlighted above all have something in common: a physical presence in the library. The rise in commons has resulted in libraries rethinking their public spaces to promote the learning mission of the institution, encourage collaboration, and to highlight library programs and services. While most libraries have reinvented their existing spaces into commons, there are some purpose-built libraries that have been built in the United States. Learning, research/scholar, and subject/format commons can be found at many institutions. Some examples of spaces that are part of redesigned or new include:

- ***The Ruppert Commons for Research, Technology, and Collaboration*** at Duke University, Durham, NC: Also known as "The Edge," this space, which opened in January 2015, includes "tools and workspaces for digital scholarship, reservable rooms for project teams, expanded technology and training facilities, and programming that encourages connection among the disciplines" ("About the Edge," 2015). This space, located in the already existing Bostock Library, was redesigned to meet the needs of researchers, who were doing increasing interdisciplinary, data-heavy work at Duke.

- ***Terman Engineering Library*** at Stanford University, Stanford, CA: The engineering library at Stanford University has been located in many different places across campus, but has been in location in the new Jen-Hsun Huang Engineering Center since 2010 ("History of Terman Library," n.d.). While this space was new, the library collection and services were redeveloped for this new location. Purchasing materials and backfiles in electronic formats has allowed the library to shrink its print collection and open more public space with furniture "designed to be flexible, allowing users to re-arrange furniture when they please for purposes of either study or collaboration as the need arises" ("History of the Terman Library," n.d.).

- ***Hunt Library*** at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC: The new Hunt Library was unveiled to the public in January 2015 with a mission to be "a place where our students, faculty, and partners can gather to research, learn, experiment, collaborate, and strengthen NC State's long tradition of leading transformative change" ("Hunt Library Vision," n.d.). This library shows what can be done with lots of funding, which was over $115.2 million, and includes collaborative study, presentation, and group workspaces.

New Professional Positions Integral to Commons

Developing dedicated library space for commons is only one part of the equation. It is also important that experienced information professionals staff these spaces. In order to better serve their users in the commons context, libraries have also begun hiring new kinds of librarian positions. These positions are frequently in line with the objectives or programs of the different library commons. These positions range from public to technical services. We will outline some of the popular kinds of positions that are being incorporated into different institutions and look at how each of them relates to the commons environment.

User Experience and Discovery Librarian positions have become popular with the proliferation of online material. User Experience Librarians focus on the physical and virtual interactions of users with the library (MacDonald, 2015). Discovery Librarians work to improve discovery of collections through metadata management and other means (Ellero, 2014). Since commons have developed in part because of the increase in online-accessible materials, both user experience and discovery are important elements of commons, since control over and development of user interfaces is essential to accessing these virtual materials. User Experience Librarians also look at the physical public spaces, which is a key component of library commons.

Some positions are also technology focused, like Emerging Technologies and Research Data positions. Since commons regularly promote the use of new technologies for further learning and scholarly work, it is important for libraries to have librarians that can work with students and faculty to learn and implement these new technologies. Emerging Technologies Librarian positions are also likely to include reference and instruction duties, which are integral to the learning spaces in commons (Radniecki, 2013). While Stang (2016)

argues that all librarians need to have some data management experience, specialized positions are also appearing at many research libraries in the US. Most of these positions have outreach or instruction elements, which are in line with library commons goals.

Finally, Scholarly Communications Librarian positions, which have been around for awhile, are also instinctively connected with library commons, particularly with research and subject based commons. Since both of these commons attract higher-level researchers, who are more likely to publish due to tenure or degree requirements, scholarly communications librarians are essential in the commons environment. In identifying trends for librarian positions, Jaguszewski and Williams (2013) discovered that scholarly communications was an integral part of information literacy instruction for users at all experience levels, which shows the need for Scholarly Communications Librarians to be involved with commons services and programs.

The Future of Librarianship

Not only have library spaces changes over the past few years, but librarianship itself. Combined with changes in how people access information, dynamic work environment have been created in which recent Masters in Library and Information Science (MLIS) graduates find themselves. In order to train library science students to adapt to these constantly changing circumstances, curriculums at institutions and iSchools must offer a variety of classes and training opportunities. According to Andrew Dillon, the Dean of the iSchool at UT-Austin, "The old educational model of being trained for a specific job no longer applies since jobs themselves no longer remain static" (2016, p.10). As discussed above, each of these new positions requires both specific knowledge and a willingness to step outside of the box and adapt to new technologies. Dillon also argues that iSchools, which house library and information science programs, have a "particular emphasis on leveraging the power of technology and information to enhance human and organizational potential" (2016, p. 268). The iSchool at the University of Maryland encourages its students and graduates to be "socially engaged and technologically focused information professionals, ready to create, educate, and innovate" ("Master of Library & Information Science," n.d.). MLIS students at UMD can follow a program or knowledge area, or can create their own curriculum. They are not limited to Library Science classes, but can, and are encouraged to, take Information Studies courses, which cover topics like programming, data visualization, and user assessment.

New technologies that appear in different commons require a new type of knowledge that had not been associated with libraries and librarianship previously. Much of this training can be done on the job, such as watching online tutorials to 3D print or play with virtual reality equipment. Almeida (2013) discusses how librarians can not only continue their education through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), but how they can become part of organizing and implementing MOOCs as collaborators with knowledge of issues like intellectual property, copyright, and archiving. Many libraries also have in-house professional development organizations; the University of Maryland Libraries host the Emerging Technologies Discussion Group and the Library Coding Group, which meet monthly and weekly respectively.

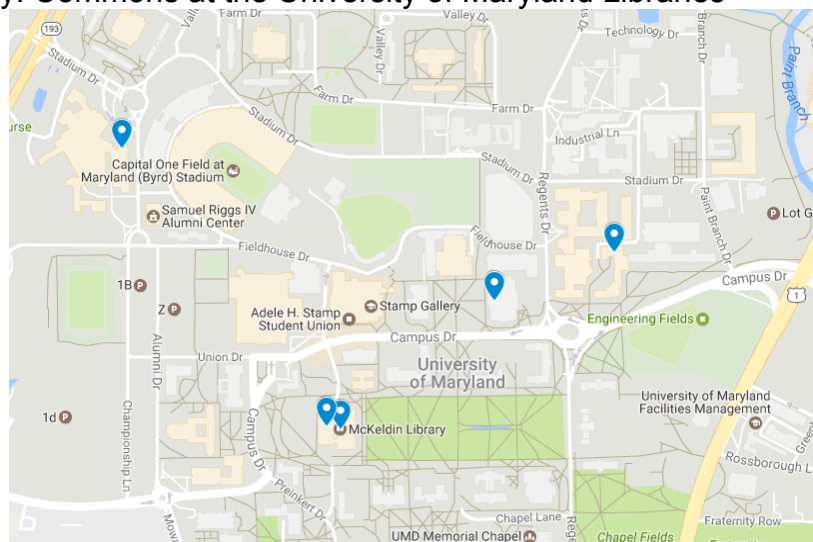## Case Study: Commons at the University of Maryland Libraries

Figure 1: Map of the various commons at UMD ("Commons at the University of Maryland," 2017)

Users at the University of Maryland (UMD) Libraries want access to all available resources at all library locations at any time. While this is a nice idea to have, it is not possible as budgets, staffing, and resources get slimmer and the university community grows larger every year. While the UMD Libraries might not be able to be all things to all people, the organization has been working to develop a robust commons program to meet the needs of its 37,000 students and 10,000 faculty and staff members. These commons are located within four of the seven libraries on the immediate UMD campus (*Figure 1*) and consist of learning commons, research commons, subject commons, and format commons. An overview of the different commons at UMD is below:

- **Terrapin Learning Commons (TLC):** The first dedicated commons to be developed at UMD, which focuses primarily to the needs of undergraduate students. The TLC's mission is to "provide students with an inviting and supportive environment that facilitates scholarly work and helps create community across all library locations" ("Terrapin Learning Commons," 2016). Located on the second floor of McKeldin Library, the main library at UMD, the TLC features a variety of group study rooms, presentation spaces, technology areas, and a makerspace. The most popular service in the TLC is the equipment for loan program, which allows students to check out a laptops, chargers, cameras, and other technology.

- **Library Media Services (LMS):** LMS has been part of the UMD Libraries for decades, but has been developing programming to support media production and film studies, making it a format commons at UMD. Staff members at LMS provide assistance with legacy equipment, media reformatting, and media production. The media production workshops are very popular events and LMS works with campus and community groups to provide instruction on video editing.

- **Research Commons:** The Research Commons at UMD is a group of services, spaces, and events to support higher-level research that is done by graduate students and faculty. The goal of the Research Commons is to "connect researchers with virtual services and to bring them together in our developing spaces ("Research Commons," 2017). Physically the Research Commons is located on the fourth floor of McKeldin Library, with plans to expand and improve the space significantly during the summer of 2017. The Research Commons also offers a variety of events and workshops, such as speaker series, presentations by campus authors, and trainings for specific programs and technologies used by researchers.

- *Subject specific commons:* Two additional commons are also part of the Research Commons, called the **Research Commons @ EPSL** and the **Research Commons @ MSPAL**. Housed in the Engineering and Physical Sciences Library (EPSL), the Research Commons at this location focuses primarily on supporting researchers in the STEM disciplines. A speaker series, called the STEAM Salon, brings together faculty from STEM and humanities to highlight interdisciplinary research currently being done in these areas. The newest Research Commons is also located in the Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library (MSPAL). Development on this commons is still occurring with the hope of providing more specialized research assistance to users from the performing arts disciplines.

At UMD, each commons has a head librarian in charge of the programs, services, and spaces, with other liaison, collections, and technical services librarians and staff providing additional support. Over the past year, faculty librarian positions have been specifically hired to support and develop the Research Commons at EPSL and MSPAL. Since some commons services, particularly equipment loan in the TLC, operate around the clock during periods of 24-hour service, the number of people involved from different library departments is quite substantial.

Along with implementing new services, developing programs and hiring staff, the UMD Libraries have also been updating spaces to meet the new teaching and learning goals of these commons. Many older spaces, like EPSL's first floor reference area (*Figure 2*) were full of library materials, with little space for users to work and collaborate. This space has since been updated (*Figure 3*), eliminating the reference collection, which has been integrated into the

regular circulating collection. Additional seating has also been added for students to collaborate, study, and, even occasionally, sleep. New technology has also been added to the space, including a TV monitor, which is used for EPSL's STEAM Salon talks and display student projects, and 3D printers, which is another popular service at EPSL. Renovations are planned at other locations to develop more collaborative and learning spaces for users.

Figure 2: EPSL reference area before being renovated

Figure 3: EPSL's completed renovation, including new seating and new technology

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