CAMPUS LIBRARY 2.0
The Information Commons

WITH THIS ISSUE: NETCONNECT, THE LIBRARIAN’S LINK TO THE NET
The information commons is a scalable, one-stop shopping experience for students and faculty

Campus Library

"E"

By Andrew Richard Albanese

EXCUSE ME, sir," a young man says, as I approach Mt. Holyoke's Williston Library. "Are you a faculty member here?" For a moment, I'm tempted to have some fun. I'm a day unshaven, with a book bag slung over my shoulder. My blazer is slightly rumpled. I could be a faculty member here. "No," I respond, after a mischievous pause. "I'm a reporter. I'm here to write a story about the library." His brows arch. "Really!" he says, excitedly. "It's a great library. I come here all the time."

"You're a student here?" I ask, wondering if somehow the venerable Mt. Holyoke College (MHC) had jettisoned its longstanding tradition as a women's college while I was stuck in traffic. "No, I go to Hampshire," he explains. "But I come here to use the library."

Mt. Holyoke is part of the Five Colleges, a consortium of schools located in the picturesque Connecticut River Valley, also including Amherst College, Smith College, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and Hampshire College. As part of a strong collaborative program, each campus library is open to students and faculty within the group. I casually ask what brings this student from Northampton to South Hadley to use the library, and I get a casual response. "I like it." He graciously holds the door open for me, and I enter the library. I see what he means. I'm standing just outside Rao's Café. Around me students are sitting at tables—eating, drinking, talking. A wellhead at the center of the space dates back to the early 16th century. It is inscribed with a Latin phrase that means "those who are thirsty come and drink freely." I heed the metaphor. Coffee at Rao's, however, costs me about a buck. To my right, there is a service desk and a large-screen TV. A group of students stand watching the TV, which broadcasts CNN, sound off, words scrolling across the screen. Sen. John Kerry is on the campaign trail. Welcome to the library.

The info commons model

What a difference a few years can make. In the late 1990s, some college and university administrators openly questioned the future of the campus library. As more information resources reside in the ether, as opposed to on shelves, the role of the library as a campus place, they surmised, would only diminish. A period of declining gate counts and circulation figures seemed to bolster those concerns. New life, however, has been breathed into the campus library. In large part this is owing to an increasingly popular concept: the information commons.

In fall 2003, Mt. Holyoke, an elite, largely undergraduate liberal arts college with a student population of roughly 2000, unveiled its take on the information commons. Located in an area known as Miles-Smith 4, the commons functions as a conduit between the main library and Dwight Hall, which houses the library offices, state-of-the-art media labs, and computer workshops. As late as last year, this area, with its open space and banks of windows, in the words of Mt. Holyoke officials, was "underutilized": it housed shelves of scientific journals. Today the space teems with students dispersed among more than 50 high-end computers, including three large flat screens for group instruction. Of course, when the Miles-Smith addition was built just 13 years ago, the Internet and e-journals did not exist at MHC.

Despite more and more colleges adopting an information commons model for their libraries, the concept remains amorphous. "I wonder," Patricia Albanese, director of MHC's Library, Information and Technology Services department and no relation to this author, will ask me at one point in our conversation, "have you found a common idea of what an information commons is?" I have not, I report. "That's

Andrew Richard Albanese is Associate Editor, LJ, and Contributing Editor, LJ Academic Newswire
what I would have thought," she says.

By now the broad strokes of the information commons have been identified for most librarians—lots of computers, collaborative space, comfortable furniture, and usually some kind of café, lounge, or other suitably social area nearby. At the University of Arizona in Tucson, the information commons is a giant ramplike locale, offering students 24-hour access to computers, support specialists, meeting places, classrooms, and an array of private and group seating.

At the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, the commons features a writing lab that has proven incredibly popular. In Bloomington, the Indiana University (IU) Libraries and University Information Technology Services opened its information commons in September 2003. It occupies a whopping 27,000 square feet on the first floor of the IU Main Library, offering students more than 250 individual and group workstations, wireless networking, and a combination of library reference services, resources, technology consultants, and a multimedia production lab. In its first three months of operation, the information commons at IU reported over 21,000 total users, who logged in to the library network more than 234,000 times.

Those numbers, say Indiana library officials, are even more impressive because they came prior to the student crunch at semester’s end, when library use tends to spike dramatically. With the addition of the information commons, gate counts have increased approximately 20 percent over last year’s numbers (see “The Future Is Now,” p. 32).

“This data confirms what we see,” said Suzanne Thorin, dean of the IU Libraries. “The information commons is a busy, active, thriving place. When I arrive at 8 a.m., students have already settled in. I’m told it’s the same in the middle of the night.”

Scalability

Your library doesn’t have to be a major research library with a major research library budget to adopt the information commons model. The model is scalable.

For MHC, the shift to an information commons happened remarkably quickly. In spring 2002, architectural consultants were hired. By August 2003, the remodeling was complete. The planned space did not require a massive gut renovation. It did not require a new building. It did require funding, new technology investments, and hefty doses of new thinking and vision. In the final tally, the library was transformed for under $500,000, with $345,000 needed to create the information commons and $150,000 to renovate and remodel library offices.

With a renovation project already budgeted prior to Albanese’s arrival at MHC less than two years ago, creating an information commons was not initially identified as an objective. So what drove Mt. Holyoke to the information commons? Simply put, Albanese explains, the model reflects a new universal truth for all academic libraries: it is impossible to divorce technology from content.

“As we started talking about the way organizationally we had to shift, the space thing came out of that,” she explains. Eventually, money that could have been spent on shelving and carpeting instead radically transformed the library. “We really had to work hard and fast to get faculty to visualize the concept. It was not easy. It was a hard thing to see because the space was changing so dramatically from what it had been.”
By most accounts, the transition for users, quick as it has been, has been surprisingly smooth. "There have not been nearly as many questions as I would have expected," Albanese says. "I see that as a sign of success, that we've chosen good products, and done good instruction." It also owes in part, she notes, to the increased technological know-how each class of students now possesses when they arrive at Mt. Holyoke and the greater simplicity of many database products.

Organizational change

The change in the library's physical appearance, however, is simply an outgrowth of its expanding role in the digital age. Behind the revamped service points of the new information commons, the MHC library organization has also evolved. In 1996 MHC merged the library, archives, academic computing, language and media resources, and electronic services departments into the Library, Information and Technology Services (LITS) Group. For now, the lines within the LITS groups are not well defined—and that's on purpose, to give the organization room to grow.

"There are days when it's going to be frustrating and days when it's going to be wonderful," notes Tamra Hjermstad, an instructional technology consultant for Visual Arts, part of MHC's Research and Instructional Technology (RIS) department, which moved into the library offices in January. "There is a realization that one day we'll find a balance. We're still figuring out what we can let go of from the old model. But we know the only constant these days is change."

The library itself is a model of collaboration. Librarians and RIS staff share offices, two to a space, instead of being separated by group or in single offices. "It's working," says Hjermstad, after just a few weeks in her new office. "There are established work routines everyone has and that you have to adjust for. But for the goal of this new RIS group it's extremely smart and was needed to get us working together more."

What can appear as a sometimes complex intertwining of previously separate missions under the library roof, in practice addresses a simple goal—to offer students and faculty a one-stop shopping experience for their needs. "The driving force of all of this is how can we make things easier for the user?" says Albanese. "Technology today is a fact of life. Certainly students see it that way. They don't make the distinctions that we've classically come from. So we as an organization need to think about it that way, the way our students think about it, and to help our faculty to use technology in ways that speak to our students."

A library by any other name

Just after lunchtime, as the first wave of classes ends, Rao's Café swells with students. Down the corridor in the information commons, students also gather. Throughout the information commons, students sit at "email stations," surfing the web and reading and exploring information commons projects, the USC Leavey Library's Lower Commons and Upper offer hundreds of computers and media labs. Also in the commons is a writing center, operated by the English department. In the Lower Commons, Express Stations, marked with orange signs, are available for a maximum of five minutes to send print jobs or for short computing sessions (such as checking email).

www.usc.edu/isd/locations/undergrad/leavey/C.html

University of Iowa, Iowa City

An early pioneer, the University of Iowa (UI) unveiled its vision of the library of the future—the Information Arcade—in 1992. Funded by $792,000 in private grants and $400,000 from the university for remodeling, in 1994 UI's vision was honored as the American Library Association/Meckler Library of the Future. Not just for main libraries, the vision expanded to the information commons at UI's Hardin Health Sciences Library, which opened in 1996. It offers support and delivery for courseware development, classroom instruction, and access to an array of health-related research. Four high-end workstations provide multimedia capabilities, including color flatbed scanners, a slide scanner, digital cameras, and video digitizing hardware. In the months after its opening, statistics showed a 15 percent jump in walk-in usage and a whopping 51 percent jump in electronic classroom attendance.

www.lib.uiowa.edu/commons

University of Southern California, Los Angeles

Its first information commons, in 1994, proved so popular, the school did it again, creating a second information commons. Frequently referenced by other libraries, University of Minnesota, Kansas City

The UMBC University Libraries Information Commons in the Miller Nichols Library opened on October 18, 2000. Spanning nearly 10,000 square feet, it features an array of furniture,
sends email. Some are hard at work at computer terminals, books by their sides. Others sit in groups, not quietly, but laughing, talking. Laptops are ubiquitous. The space is networked for wireless, and the library offers a popular laptop loan program. One student is cat-napping on a comfortable sofa. Some things never change.

Albanese says MHC doesn’t keep traditional gate counts, but since the opening of the information commons head counts are conducted. “The library has a lot more people in it,” she says. “It has become more of an active place. The community comes in more for different things. They’re not just coming in to get a book or find a quiet space, though they are certainly coming in for that. They’re also coming in to have a cup of coffee and interact with their friends or colleagues. Before, we didn’t have a lot of space for group activity; now we have a lot more of that.”

At Mt. Holyoke another key aspect of the information commons model emerges. A library by any other name is still a library. The information commons is in reality a new edition of the campus library, one that necessarily supports both the information and the media with which that information has now become fused.

Students today at the MHC library borrow everything from books to digital cameras. They get reference help, assistance navigating electronic databases, or technical instruction on how to do a PowerPoint presentation. A student at MHC can find the information resources, the equipment, and the instruction to use it all in the library. Socked by a virus with your paper due in a day? The information commons can help.

“I have a student in there right now doing a Windows restore,” says Marc Boucher, nodding over his shoulder to the diagnostic center, based in the commons. “It crashed, so she had to go back to the beginning and format the machine from scratch. But first we had to save all of her previous work in DOS.” The center is yet another example of meeting student needs all under the library roof. Boucher, co-ordinator of lab operations in the Department of Technical Support and Repair, says it is not uncommon for upwards of a half-dozen machines to be worked on at one time.

The purple crayon

In the late afternoon, I am sitting in on the weekly meeting with Mt. Holyoke’s RIS department, chaired by RIS director Owen Ellard. After listening to the group’s discussion, it’s clearer than ever that getting students into the library—an initial concern as the digital age spawned visions of “the deserted library”—is no longer the case. The students are here. At Mt. Holyoke, and at campus libraries nationwide, the current challenge is to expand continually what we think of when we think of library services and to break those services outside of library walls.

Hjermstad shows her colleagues a one-minute video on “childhood and gender” that she made as part of a conference program. Everyone is impressed and delighted with her effort, not just for her creativity but for demonstrating the capabilities now available for students to express themselves. The theme of Hjermstad’s video involves the popular children’s cartoon Harold and the Purple Crayon. In the cartoon, Harold uses his purple crayon and his imagination to recreate his environment. It’s a fitting theme, I think. It is, after all, as though someone has taken Harold’s magic crayon to the Mt. Holyoke library.

“We’re just trying to grab on to ways we can enhance the curriculum,” Hjermstad explains. “Not override the curriculum but really give our students and faculty the tools they need to express themselves.”

For librarians and faculty, the information commons is still sometimes referred to as a bold new direction. For students, now congregating in the information commons after dinner hours, the model is already successful. Hjermstad notes how the students seem especially to appreciate the library’s collaborative space. “Collaboration really is key,” she notes. “From a technology point of view, you really can’t do anything by yourself any more. You need content, expertise, design, software. Each of us brings an expertise to the table, and together we realize a finished product that is worthwhile and lasting.”