

The Information Commons: A Platform For Innovation

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Abstract:

Information Commons have successfully served as platforms for innovations in facilities and service programs within libraries over the past 2 decades. In this article, the author makes a series of points concerning the significance and meaning of the Information Commons as a trend, including the strength of the concept as a bridge between the past and future of libraries, limitations in perceptions concerning Information Commons, and the ways that the trend may play out in the future.

Keywords: barriers to innovation | cultural capital | Information Commons

Article:

Over the past 20 years, a wide range of libraries have responded to their rapidly changing technological surroundings by creating inventive new facilities and service programs variously termed “Information Commons,” “Learning Commons,” “Information Arcades,” and other evocative labels for innovations in how the library benefits their clientele. In this article, I will collectively refer to all such facilities or programs as Information Commons for the sake of simplicity, although I am the first to point out the great degree of variation found within this seemingly homogenous trend. The variety of innovations in technology, media, and services found in Information Commons established in the past two decades is extraordinary, as is the range of improved benefits that they offer to their clienteles. My colleague Charles Forrest and I have elsewhere documented this trend in a monograph collection of essays and survey entries of dozens of examples of such facilities and programs (Forrest & Halbert, 2009), and Robert Seal has provided a brief history of the trend in this issue of the *Journal of Library Administration* (pp. 1–6). My purpose here is therefore not to document the trend and its wide degrees of variation, to provide case studies, or to give advice to those planning an Information Commons. Articles on all of these topics may be found elsewhere in this special issue or in the monograph I have cited. I will also not attempt to review any of this background material here but instead will assume that the reader is already familiar with the contemporary context of the Information Commons, as there is now a great deal of descriptive research documenting the specifics of this trend.

Rather, what I will provide in this brief article is a distillation of my own observations and conclusions concerning the meaning and significance of the Information Commons as a platform for innovation in library services and benefits to users. My reasons for this approach are

simple: at some point after anyone has examined many instances of individual Information Commons, it becomes critical to begin understanding the significance of the trend in a larger sense rather than continuing to catalog individual examples of Information Commons and how they were planned and implemented. As professionals confronted with the reality of this trend, we have to integrate it into our understanding of the library field.

Consequently, there are three broad points that I will make in this article, and I deliberately structure these points in terms of understanding meaning and significance (rather than specific descriptive technical details). This is because I think that we have not yet effectively attempted to comprehend how the cultural context of libraries impacts, frames, and structures our efforts to innovate in facilities and programs such as the Information Commons, and conversely how these efforts challenge our understanding of libraries. My first point gets at this issue directly by examining the ways that innovations in libraries (in other words, breaks with the past) have nevertheless been constrained by a sometimes intransigent continuity with our traditional iconic understanding of libraries. (I hasten to add that these framing conceptions of libraries are held by both the clientele and staff of libraries.) My second point concerns the flip side of the first point, namely how the deep conceptual foundations of libraries can (if built upon in the right way) provide opportunities for both the clientele and staff of libraries to constructively reinterpret and build new platforms for innovation on the received cultural model of libraries that we share as members of society. Finally, I will examine a third point that emerges from studying the Information Commons trend, and that is the fact that neither our previous limiting iconic ideas about libraries nor our innovative aspirations for what they should become may determine what they in fact will become.

How innovation in the Information Commons is constrained by tradition

Despite the fact that the technological landscape within which libraries operate has changed enormously during the past two decades, there is a surprising degree of continuity in libraries today with outlooks and practices that predate contemporary computing systems. When interviewing institutions that have either implemented or are planning to implement an Information Commons (without naming names), I have frequently been struck not by the breadth of ideas that are encountered but rather by the real or perceived constraints in imagination that manifest in terms of what such facilities or programs might encompass. Yes, Information Commons routinely incorporate new computing technologies and new recombinations of existing service programs. But in a remarkable percentage of instances, the resulting facility or program is not dramatically more innovative or fundamentally different from what predated it. Libraries have a great store of inertia in their institutional traditions and practices, an inertia that resists dramatic breaks with the past. A surprising number of Information Commons are simply renovated facilities (new carpet and paint) with a smattering of updated computers and a new service point for staff that carry forward only slightly modified service programs and policies. There is very often a real sense of conceptual constraint in evidence at such Information Commons, stemming from many different quarters. Sometimes the library staff members have not been able to innovatively reconceive their programs and facilities, and what is termed an Information Commons seems to be nothing more than an unremarkable library facility upgraded to reasonably contemporary standards of furniture and computers. This does not signify innovation; it simply represents maintaining an adequate level of quality in library service operations. Labeling this kind of facility an Information Commons is akin to the fresh coat of

paint that is usually applied to the facility, it gives it a new car smell without really changing anything substantively.

More often, this kind of pseudo Information Commons arises not because of a failure of imagination by the library staff but instead because the higher administrative officials with decision-making authority over library renovations cannot reconceptualize the library in terms of contemporary 21st-century innovation. For some, the imagined iconic library of echoing marble halls and dusty book stacks is a constraining context rather than a foundation on which to build.

I am haunted by an encounter I had with a senior member of our university's faculty shortly after we renovated our library complex around a centrally featured Information Commons. He was standing in what had formerly been the marble-walled entrance lobby of the library, and which had now become a gallery overlooking the opened space of the Information Commons with a variety of new computer clusters and technology rooms. He stood bewildered, staring at his surroundings, clutching my arm as if for support, and asking in a plaintive voice, "Excuse me, can you tell me where the library is? It used to be here. I know it was here. ..."

I do not mean to be either judgmental or ageist in this anecdote, as I both understood and sympathized with his confusion, as well as the confusion of younger scholars who were initially disoriented by the visual discontinuity between the renovated library (with its Information Commons) and the former austerity of the library entrance. It did look remarkably different; instead of a stark black marble chamber, the new library entrance was bright and warmly appointed with light wood paneling. And yes, there were many computers where there had previously been none. Most important, there was an array of newly created high-technology and collaborative media service centers established to provide improved information services for scholars.

But what struck me in that moment of trying to help the dismayed faculty member was that he fundamentally could not understand the new facility as a library! The conceptual and visual leap, at least in that first encounter, was too much for him. This place was bright with computers and technology; whatever it was, it therefore could not be a library. I helped him to eventually understand that although the library might have new and unfamiliar features, it was still fundamentally the place to go to seek comprehensive access to information to satisfy his research needs.

Not everyone can make that leap. I relate this idiosyncratic encounter at length because it is emblematic of a barrier to innovation that library leaders encounter all too often today. Rather than being able to creatively and collaboratively explore ways to create needed information service innovations for the clientele they serve, many colleagues at my own and other institutions report that they have run into the brick and mortar wall of the iconic library. The university administrations to which they report are all too often baffled by discussions of contemporary library service innovations. When they finally come to understand what the librarian is proposing, they may respond along the following lines, "I understand how what you are proposing would benefit the information needs of our researchers, but what you are describing is not a library program. I grant you that it may be a new kind of information technology center that we need. But it isn't a library." (Sadly, this is a real quote attributed to a provost of an institution that shall remain nameless.)

The significance of this response is unlikely to be lost on the reader. In situations in which clientele are fundamentally unable to understand the library as an institution that responsively adapts and changes to serve their information needs, the library inevitably becomes marginalized and conceptually replaced by other entities. This is the most disturbing

phenomenon that I have observed in talking to colleagues around the country about their efforts to create innovative new Information Commons. The pace at which new technologies are introduced necessitates that libraries incorporate new systems and adapt service programs accordingly to provide for the information needs of their clientele. Whether or not they successfully achieve this goal depends on the energy and vision of the librarians undertaking the effort. But they may never even get the chance if their administrations see the library as conceptually frozen in time.

Fortunately (and obviously, given the prevalence of the trend this article is examining), librarians are routinely given the opportunity to forge ahead with innovative new services. And what they have achieved in the many Information Commons that have been implemented is truly remarkable and significant for the reinterpretation of libraries in the 21st century and beyond.

How innovation in the Information Commons successfully builds on tradition

As I have just asserted, libraries have strong institutional traditions and cultural framing by both librarians and users. Although this may be a barrier to change, it must simultaneously be recognized as a powerful philosophical foundation and wellspring for creative service improvement. Libraries have great “cultural capital,” a phrase first made popular by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1988) in analyzing power structures in higher education. (Bourdieu also referred to this quality as “symbolic capital.”) The gist of this notion as it relates here is that libraries are culturally respected (if not always financially rewarded) institutions. The iconic concept of the library is embedded in a framework of socially received cultural assumptions and judgments that value libraries as egalitarian locations for sharing information.

When interviewing both librarians and users about what they see as the benefits of an Information Commons, the core assumptions of value surrounding the concept of “library” for both librarians and users that surface repeatedly have to do with sharing information as a common resource among the members of some community. This is the basic cultural capital that is foundational to society’s understanding of what constitutes a library.

The practical result of this is not only that people cannot understand or accept new services as library services if new services are not conceptually framed in these terms, but that librarians can powerfully build on these concepts when conceiving and seeking to create Information Commons. Elizabeth Milewicz examined these conceptual foundations and cultural building blocks in her examination of the genesis of the Information Commons (Forrest & Halbert, 2009, pp. 3–17), pointing out the cachet of the phrase itself. Pairing the two words “Information” and “Commons” is a potent and intuitive way of building on the traditional cultural capital of the library while simultaneously bringing a new appellation forward to distinguish a new program from what has gone before. As a label, “Information Commons” instantly accomplishes several seemingly conflicting objectives. It paints an immediate mental image of something specifically novel but ambiguous enough to provide room for interpretation. It simultaneously situates a new facility or service program in the compelling excitement of the “Information Age” but also in the safely familiar and trustworthy cultural landscape of the library.

For all these reasons the phrase is a powerful and practical rhetorical tool for innovation in libraries. It lends itself to localized interpretation, which is essential for success in the tremendously varying priorities and contexts of institutions of higher education today. But it also has the instant ring of something traditional and widely accepted (indeed, Information Commons

now are widely adopted, a self-fulfilled prophetic trend). It can encompass something very limited (new computers in a facility, or simply computers of a different type) or something very broad and sweeping (a reconceptualization of the entire library around new information technology, collaborative services, integrated campus teaching models, etc.).

In our survey work of such facilities, Forrest and I also found that the phrase lives comfortably at different levels of hierarchical relation with the library itself (Forrest & Halbert, 2009). Information Commons can contentedly be either a component of a library (the majority of cases), a new label for the entire library, or even a name for something that overlaps or subsumes the library. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, the phrase itself is flexible and subject to variation depending on the strategic direction or emphasis that a university wishes to place on the innovation. What is more important to you to emphasize? An Information Commons, a Learning Commons, a Technology Commons, a Virtual Commons, an Academic Commons, or something else? What is the story you are trying to tell? Where are you trying to go?

Given the cultural roots, conceptual significance, and tactical elasticity of the phrase, it is not surprising that facilities and programs called Information Commons have become a leading platform for innovation in libraries today. But in this role the Information Commons may come to signify something very unexpected for libraries.

How Information Commons are driven by innovation

Over the past two decades, technological change has been the largest single driver of change in libraries as well as society as a whole. The shared social experience and expectations of most people concerning access to information has not been shaped by libraries, but rather by sweeping changes in the technological environment such as the advent of microcomputers, networks, and the increasing shifts in the style and capacity for collaborative interactions between people made possible by these technological advances. Examination of the Information Commons trend suggests to me that it is a healthy and creative response by libraries to adapt to changing opportunities and expectations of library users. As technologies such as general purpose microcomputers and the Web became a common (and affordable) aspect of daily life, libraries have successfully been able to incorporate these systems in inventive ways, especially in Information Commons, thereby benefitting library users in many new ways. As I have pointed out, libraries are uniquely suited culturally to do this through facilities and services that emphasize shared, collaborative access to information systems. Information Commons are increasingly seen not simply as a successful platform for innovation in libraries but fundamentally as the shape of libraries to come.

This transition of Information Commons from interesting experiments in libraries to the mainstream of library services is arguable and a prospectively emerging conclusion, but I see evidence in the Information Commons trend to support such a possibility. Such a turn of events would echo the way that other transformative technological innovations have caused a rapid evolution in many other industries, a metatrend that has been analyzed at length by Clayton Christensen (1997) as a dilemma faced by any innovator because the innovation may replace the original institution. The Information Commons has not yet become perceived as a threat to libraries, probably because it has been received as such a successful and flexible response to changing user demands for information access. But, as I have been at pains to point out in this article, the strength of the Information Commons to date has not only stemmed from responsive

innovations in libraries but also and significantly because it has successfully served as a cultural and conceptual bridge for libraries from the past to the future.

The dilemma that librarians already confront in the Information Commons is precisely the tension between the two sides of this bridge that manifests itself in the reaction of the provost who could no longer recognize the Information Commons as anything to do with the library. This is not so much a reactionary moment when librarians or their clientele dig in their heels, refusing to let go of the iconic concept of the print library (although that obviously can and does happen at times) but rather a kind of fork in the road when we all have to decide what libraries are going to evolve into, what they are going to become, and how or if we are going to continue to recognize them as libraries. The Information Commons is an elastic term, a kind of institutional stem cell that could become many different kinds of organizations. We cannot predict what directions the ever-accelerating pace of technological change will take, but we will be forced to make decisions concerning how we adapt to those changes.

As libraries increasingly morph into Information Commons, whether explicitly through wholesale name changes or implicitly in changing forms and practices, the underlying meaning of the label Information Commons will inevitably assume greater prominence. How much of the cultural traditions of libraries will continue to inform the innovations of the Information Commons, as opposed to other prominent commercial institutions of shared access, such as malls or advertising? Academia as a whole has increasingly shifted toward more commercial forms, and the Information Commons could very easily become the Information Mall. (Indeed, I am familiar with some campuses at least considering this variation on the theme.)

Part of the nearly universal praise that accrues to successful Information Commons is the way that such facilities and service programs have happily reinterpreted traditional library values in new ways. This reinterpretation could take very different directions going forward from this fork in the road. My own hope and (I think) the hope of most librarians is that however the Information Commons evolves, it will still be an institution that signifies and is informed by fundamentally egalitarian and collaborative modes of access to information rather than biased commercial interests. Time will tell.

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