

Lessons from the information commons frontier

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Abstract:

The spontaneous appearance of facilities and services termed “Information Commons” in many major academic libraries across North America represents a significant new trend which is likely to grow in coming years. Don Beagle has correctly identified the key features of this multifaceted concept in his article “Designing an Information Commons,” and has posed very relevant questions in his section on service patterns for institutions considering these kind of new designs. In this brief commentary, it may be helpful to provide some perspectives on these questions resulting from an implementation of the Information Commons concept at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. These perspectives may clarify some issues, but also raise new problematic challenges for libraries adopting this new paradigm. Emory University recently designed

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Emory University recently designed and constructed a new complex termed the Center for Library and Information Resources (CLAIR), which opened in 1997. The CLAIR project accomplished a number of goals, including integration of the Candler and Woodruff libraries into one large complex, substantive renovation of the latter library, and a major new building featuring a variety of high technology areas. The centerpiece of the complex is the Information Commons, a collection of coordinated facilities providing comprehensive access to information technology. The Emory CLAIR and Information Commons (in practice the name is almost always abbreviated to just “Infocommons”), largely incorporate the design concepts which Don

Beagle articulates in his article, although the principles were developed outside of the theoretical context of Strategic Alignment. One aspect of the CLAIR that was considered an exploration of new service opportunities was the combination of staff working areas and functions for librarians and the majority of the campus Information Technology Division staff. At the time that the facility and new services of the CLAIR were designed, the venture was perceived with both excitement and some trepidation by the many involved parties. It was clear that it represented unknown territory in many ways, some that were obvious, and some that were only dimly perceived.

In the time since the CLAIR and the Infocommons opened, the library has experienced a host of innovations in service and facilities. Where the old library facilities featured some dozens of DOS-based information retrieval computers, the Information Commons features hundreds of Windows NT workstations with a comprehensive suite of software that includes Web browsers, MS Office, and collaborative classroom Workgroup software as well as the traditional library networked CD-ROM applications. A variety of centers for facilitating faculty hypermedia and full-text projects surround the Infocommons, with associated new service units for support. The combination of a new conceptual and physical space has indeed resulted in a dramatically new type of library. What lessons have been learned which might suggest answers to the questions posed in “Designing an Information Commons?”

First, do the expanded technological services degrade the quality of traditional reference service? The question is difficult to answer in some ways, because comparisons between the old and the new settings are like comparisons between apples and oranges. In the new setting, the general information service desk provides traditional reference services, informed referrals, and many types of computer assistance. The reference staff believes that the quality of their service has improved overall, but also point out that the way in which the library is used has changed in significant ways. Because of the extensive access to technology, many patrons now use the library more frequently and for longer periods of time. Previously, students gathered information at the library (e.g., books and online data) and took it away to do something with it. Now they can write papers, tabulate data, design Web pages, and collaborate in groups using computers, all without leaving the library. This leads to a different kind of one-stop-shopping mode of research and learning that has greatly boosted library usage. It also increases demands and expectations on staff, as will be discussed.

Do users adapt their queries to changing expectations of the limits of service delivery? Yes and no. The Nintendo generation adapts to virtually any and all new dazzling technologies without much ado, but more traditionally oriented generations confront gleaming new computerized spaces with dismay. The problematic response of the latter group is exemplified by a local anecdote about the askance confusion of the grizzled faculty member standing in the (still recognizable, surely!) lobby of the new facility, looking out on a sea of computer terminals (the book stacks are still where they have always been though!) and asking over and over, “Can you tell me, where is the *library*? I’m trying to find the *library*. It used to be *here*.” Special care must be taken that new Information Commons facilities do not alienate those users looking for a traditional experience of the library, with all of its delightful textures of marble stairs and mahogany bookcases.

Returning to hi-tech questions, does the virtual environment work better with uniformity or differentiation? This was a question of special anxiety and many debates in the design of the Emory Infocommons, with strongly held opinions on both sides. After experimenting to the point of exhaustion with both approaches, the conclusion has slowly emerged that the best approach is

neither uniformity nor differentiation, but something rather different, which at Emory has come to be termed *ubiquity*. Examining technological interfaces in other common contexts may help to get at what this concept means.

The problems inherent in the question begin to be obvious if one asks, regarding the interfaces of automobiles, cell phones, or vending machines, “Does uniformity or differentiation work better?” The answer is obvious, there has to be enough of both to make for effective usage. If they are to be useful, there must be enough relatively uniform interface features in any car, telephone, or vending machine that the mass of people who encounter them can use them without inordinate training. There also has to be enough differentiation that different models and locales are attractive to relevant cross-sections of the population.

Cars, telephones, and vending machines are ubiquitous features of everyday life precisely because they strike this intuitive balance. The challenge in designing Infocommons workstations is the same—to really make the concept work. There must be a critical mass of fundamental commonalities; at Emory these are identified as logon procedure, common GUI and menu approaches, and core sets of software resources. There also has to be relevant differentiation. Users of the Chemistry Library expect their workstations to present them with a menu of choices relevant to their specialized research needs, as opposed to users of the main facility who intuitively expect to be presented with a generalized set of resources. However, the machines cannot be so different that skills developed in using one group of machines cannot be transferred to the other. The Emory Infocommons machines seem to be inviting and appealing precisely because they aim at this balance of needs.

Finally, does effective service delivery in the Information Commons require a “hybrid” “mixed skills” support staff, or one with increasingly specialized skills. The answer at Emory appears to be a little bit of both. Traditional reference staff will require new training and skills to be effective. This is inescapable. The fact is also just as ineluctable that nobody can possibly know everything. Gaining additional knowledge broadly applicable to new technology must also be paired with relevant specialization in particular topics (both technical and subject-based) as well as an ability to make effectively targeted referrals. The model simply breaks down without a combination of these features.

To conclude, the Infocommons has both empowered and challenged the staff of Emory University in many ways, very much as Don Beagle suggests the model may. Consequently, Emory librarians have stretched in new directions, taken on new responsibilities, and developed many new views about what students might like to do in a library. As the library profession confronts the challenges of new information media and technologies, these and the many fresh perspectives of other institutions may lead to the development of quite interesting redefinitions of roles in the future of librarianship.