

CASE STUDIES

The Library as Learning Commons: Rethink, Reuse, Recycle

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At Oregon State University (OSU) Libraries, librarians are evaluating the decade-old information commons in the transition to a learning commons. Visits to commons spaces at libraries across the country provided perspective on this transition. This paper describes the development of the OSU Libraries Information Commons, identifies themes from our trips to other commons, and discusses the idea that we need to incorporate the concepts of the commons throughout the library in recognition that wherever our students are in the library becomes their learning commons.

KEYWORDS *Collaboration, information commons, learning commons, learning spaces*

INTRODUCTION

When Oregon State University's (OSU) Valley Library Information Commons opened for business in 1999, its integrated services and focus on digital information put it at the cutting edge of library learning spaces. Since that time, the wider conversation about library learning spaces has evolved, focusing on the idea of the learning commons. A decade after our first information commons opened, OSU librarians are looking to shift to a learning commons model. In this paper, we suggest that the learning commons model should be transfused throughout the library rather than conceived of as a single space within the library.

While the conversations about information and learning commons in the literature are valuable, they are limited, and they tend to focus on success

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stories. To get around these limitations, OSU librarians used a unique, in-house “library innovation grant” to fund trips for six librarians to visit commons spaces in nine academic libraries in 2009. The commons we visited ranged from cutting-edge facilities in brand-new buildings to creative transformations of traditional spaces.

Our direct observations and conversations at these other libraries broadened our perspective of our own transition. Seeing a variety of spaces at different stages of development highlighted the importance of ongoing improvement and change within the commons in libraries nationwide. Observing the creative ways other libraries repurposed technology and resources showed how the commons is not tied to cutting-edge technology and expensive furnishings. We came away from the process thinking beyond the physical limits of the commons, with new ideas for embedding the principles of the commons throughout our library. These ideas are particularly relevant at a time when higher education budgets are static or shrinking, and thus many libraries lack the resources to build new library spaces or renovate existing spaces.

In this paper, we will provide background for the importance of the concepts of information and learning commons. We will provide an overview of commons spaces at our own institution, Oregon State University, as well as the insights we gained during our travels to other commons spaces. Finally, we will discuss the common themes that emerged from the libraries we visited and how the ideas of rethinking, reusing, and recycling commons spaces can be a useful framework for moving toward a new vision of library commons spaces.

Review of the Literature

The idea of a learning commons has existed for at least two decades, though the terms used to describe it vary. In his discussion of the “teaching library,” Tompkins envisioned a space that would be familiar today as a library commons: “an integrated environment, replete with information specialists working in concert with teaching faculty and rich in courseware and information resources—a facility in which text, animation, graphics, sound and video (and professional support) are configured to meet the needs of the independent learner. . .” (1990, 78). Tompkins also sets the stage for later discussions on campus collaborations and the importance of informal learning spaces, outside of the traditional formal classroom learning space, by noting that such planning “calls for campus collaboration to devise a facility that will continue—via computer courseware, information software and print products—the learning that is formally initiated in the lecture hall” (78).

In the years since the idea of the learning commons was first introduced, discussions and research on the broader issue of campus learning

spaces has included frequent mention of library commons spaces and has expanded to include virtual learning spaces along with physical spaces (Brown 2005; Dugdale 2009). The habits and preferences of Generation Y students, especially their desire for social and experiential learning, figure heavily in the design of learning spaces and the need for integrated and collaborative services to support those spaces and the learning that takes place within them (Bailey and Tierney 2002; Beagle 1999; Brown; Lippincott 2004).

As part of the transition in both the design of library learning spaces and the terminology used to describe these spaces, the concept of the learning commons has become more prevalent. There appears, however, to be no clear agreement that the learning commons is different from the information commons (or the research commons or just the commons, the term used in this paper). Lippincott acknowledges that she has used the terms “information commons” and “learning commons” interchangeably (2006, 7.17). However, Stephen Abraham, in his introduction to Beagle’s *The Information Commons Handbook*, gets at the idea of the shift from the information commons to the learning commons by referring to libraries moving *back* to a “user-centered approach” (away from a techno-centric focus) and instead using “technology in the service of our clients” (Beagle 2006, vii). MacWhinnie provides some underpinnings for this idea of the learning commons by noting the broader trend to “collocate learning resources with other services for the convenience of users” (2003, 243).

While various learning resources and services are found in many information commons, collaboration among the units providing these services may be missing. Lippincott (2004) stresses the importance of true collaboration (not just coordination or collocation) in the provision of user-centered services. Building partnerships is key to collaboratively offering a full suite of services that support information discovery, processing of information, and the creation of knowledge products resulting from the learning process. Partnering to support student learning may be seen as a fundamental difference between the information commons and learning commons.

Despite many different implementations of commons spaces over time, challenges remain. Partnerships are often at the heart of these challenges. Beagle writes, “The challenge of the Information Commons is to devise a continuum of service that provides the user with skilled staff consultation and an array of technological options for the identification, retrieval, processing and presentation in a variety of formats” (1999, 86). Lippincott (2004) concurs and notes that providing resources and supporting learning in this environment requires collaboration that is grounded in shared values, shared planning, and a sharing or pooling of resources.

As libraries try to better define their impact on student learning, (re) naming commons spaces to highlight student *learning*—the intended outcome for the space—is both logical and strategic. The learning commons

terminology clearly indicates to campus administration that the library is not merely a support unit; rather, it is an integral part of the student learning experience.

With virtual spaces claiming their place alongside physical spaces as environments where learning occurs, and with technology allowing nearly any space to become a learning space, libraries must expand their view of the commons beyond the physical commons. Thus, it is appropriate to examine and rethink the concept of the commons to determine how it can be expanded in a way that allows the library in its entirety to become the learning commons.

The Evolution of the Learning Commons at Oregon State University

PHASE 1: BUILDING REMODEL

The Valley Library went through a significant remodel in 1999, and the information commons was a significant part of the vision for the new space. A task force was charged with developing a vision for the commons. This group surveyed faculty and student groups about the services that should be provided in the new space. In a second round of surveys, they focused on campus departments perceived as having limited access to technologies needed to do research in 1999. They also included community groups and local K–12 schools in this round of surveys (Born et al. 1998).

At this time, the Libraries were part of the Information Services unit at Oregon State University, a unit that also included computing and network support. It is not surprising, therefore, that technology issues dominated the discussions about the commons. In particular, the planning documents focus on how the commons would fit with technology resources located elsewhere on the OSU campus. They reflect the perception that there were “have” and “have not” departments on campus; the information commons was intended, in part, as a way for students and faculty in the “have not” departments to access cutting edge information technologies and productivity tools. At the same time, there was a repeated concern that the information commons not duplicate services offered elsewhere on campus. For example, when the planning team discussed the largest general-purpose lab on the OSU campus, they said “the two facilities *together* will present an impressive opportunity for the OSU community to access technological tools and services” (Born et al. 1998, 1, emphasis added).

At the same time, looking back at these documents, it is striking how many features that would become standard in academic library commons were predicted by this group. The 1998 and 1999 planning documents describe an innovative, technologically rich commons with specific spaces to support a variety of student learning activities, including multimedia production, scholarly research, multimedia viewing, group and individual study, and presentation practice. The task force recognized that the full

vision was too ambitious to be implemented all at once. They recommended that “the initial implementation should be limited in scale, rather than services” (Born et al. 1998, 4). In other words, even if they could only afford to offer a new service on a few workstations, they wanted to do so.

This vision was not entirely realized in 1999. Budget constraints made it impossible to provide all of the services suggested, even on a small scale. Workstations to support the more ambitious forms of multimedia production were not provided. Locally produced image and sound databases intended to support multimedia production were not created. An ambitious proposal for presentation practice spaces was delayed. Internet-enabled group study spaces were not built. Some hardware options, such as scanners and video digitizing equipment, were not installed.

In 2001, a second working group was convened to assess and evaluate the services provided by the information commons. This group surveyed librarians to identify issues that could be resolved immediately, and issues that would require long-term solutions. In both cases, the problems identified by the working group fall under two broad headings. The first group of problems related to users’ navigation of the commons, both online and in the physical space. Second, there were problems related to the connections between the commons and public services units elsewhere in the library. In the short term, the working group proposed simple solutions like improving signage. In the longer term, the solutions included cross-training with other campus units, reconfiguring service desks, shifting to a more flexible, modular floor plan, and clarifying referral procedures (Bokay et al. 2001). At this point, no major changes were made in the spaces or services associated with the Valley Library Information Commons.

PHASE 2: INCREASING COLLABORATION

After the 1999 remodel, the Valley Library became a central learning space on the OSU campus. In the early part of the twenty-first century, academic librarians around the country began to grapple with the question of how to put library services and resources “where our users are.” Oregon State students, especially undergraduate students, were frequently in the library. Instead of designing spaces to attract users from elsewhere on campus, the challenge OSU librarians faced was to create spaces flexible enough to meet students’ needs at that time, and to continue meeting their needs into the future.

The development of the Collaborative Learning Center (CLC) in The Valley Library demonstrates this, and provides a useful starting point to understand the second phase of development for the commons. Recognizing that the Valley Library was already a popular learning space for undergraduate students, OSU’s College of Science suggested placing a new, drop-in tutoring center in the commons. The services would be available primarily during the evening hours, when students were already studying in the

library. The CLC was developed as a collaborative project with several campus partners, including the College of Science, the Center for Writing and Learning, and the Academic Success Center. Space for the CLC was carved out of the existing commons, using flexible, modular building materials to support further renovation if needed. The management of the space was also collaborative, with support and resources coming from all over campus.

The immediate success of the CLC showed the need for further examination of the library commons. In 2006, a small project team made up of the Undergraduate Services Librarian and a science librarian submitted a proposal to library administration that detailed next steps for the commons. There are two major themes evident in this proposal: (1) the idea of a flexible physical space that students can configure and reconfigure, and (2) the idea that the services available in the commons should be collaboratively provided by the libraries and other campus units (Walker and Deitering 2006).

As a result of this proposal, the Valley Library made significant changes to the furnishings in the commons. As happened in many academic library commons spaces, heavy, stationary furnishings were replaced with lightweight tables and chairs on wheels. Furniture to support students' increasing use of laptop computers was also purchased, as were computer workstations that better supported group and collaborative work. The reference desk was reconfigured so that librarians were more visible to students as they entered the space.

The library also offered additional services by partnering with OSU's Community Network team for technology support and with Student Multimedia Services (SMS). Community Network student workers began staffing a walk-up Computer Help Desk in the reference area. SMS provided equipment check-out, poster printing, and video editing services from their own walk-up desk in the commons.

In many ways, the changes made in 2006 were designed to meet student needs that the librarians in 1999 had anticipated but lacked the resources to address. In some cases, changes in technology made the needs more immediate and urgent. For example, the existence of wireless Internet access made support for laptop use much more important than it had been in 1999. In other cases, changing attitudes about what were legitimate uses for library spaces made it possible to visualize new uses for existing spaces. By 2006, OSU librarians no longer thought that library resources had to be at the center of any service or space created in the commons.

LEARNING COMMONS INFORMATION GATHERING TRIPS

After ten years of viewing our commons through the lens of our own campus, we felt that it was time to seek out new ideas for moving toward the next phase of our commons journey—the learning commons. In the winter and spring of 2009, six OSU Libraries' instruction librarians set out to visit

information or learning commons in academic libraries across the country. Librarian pairs headed to the southwest, southeast, and midwest. Each team visited at least two academic libraries known to have innovative services or spaces offered in the commons.

Before heading out on our travels, all six librarians met to determine what questions we wanted to ask, what aspects of the commons we wanted to focus on, and what outcomes we collectively wanted to achieve from these trips. We initially started with ideas about how we could quantify what was happening in the different spaces we would be visiting, such as how many computers were in each commons and how many staff members worked in these spaces. We also wanted to find out how each of these libraries planned strategically for the design of their commons spaces. For example, we wanted to know whether formal assessments were carried out or if other campus units were involved in the planning phases. The hope was that, by asking some similar baseline questions at each of the libraries we visited, we would be able to have a wide range of resources from which to draw when considering strategic plans for our own learning commons.

Of course, each team of two librarians brought their own strengths and interests to their interactions at the various commons visited. In addition, hosts at the various libraries featured different aspects of their commons. Some of our librarian teams emphasized quantification of physical spaces, some delved more into the assessment and instruction elements, and others focused on the technological aspects of these evolving commons spaces. Each team compiled a report upon their return and shared this report with the other teams as well as within our department so that we could all learn from the data and insights gathered from the range of sites visited.

Among the three teams of librarians, we visited commons and learning spaces in nine academic libraries. Library administrators and commons staff at each library were actively engaged in the on-going process of trying to successfully meet the needs of their patrons, and there were significant differences in how this was accomplished at each location. For example, some of the commons spaces were newly built or remodeled with all of the latest available technology options, while other commons spaces had not been physically updated for decades. Some of the libraries visited were undergoing significant staffing changes due to budgetary pressures, while other libraries were able to maintain current staffing levels. Despite these differences, we were able to spot several important trends among these commons spaces that provided valuable insights into how a successful commons could be developed with or without financing for physical remodeling.

Discussion

In addition to serving as the framework for moving forward with commons spaces, the process of rethinking, reusing, and recycling also serves as a

framework for thinking about the trends identified in the planning and operation of the commons spaces we visited. Libraries across the country are continually exploring ways to leverage their commons spaces, services, staffing, and collections in ways that allow them to remain relevant and attractive to their patrons as well as enhance the student learning experience.

RETHINKING THE COMMONS

Much of what inspired us at the various commons spaces we visited was tied to the ways these libraries pushed themselves to continuously rethink the scope and purpose of their own library commons spaces. One way was to be purposeful in assessing their users' needs when planning for their commons. Another was to foster a flexible and responsive mindset that allowed staff to freely try out new ideas.

Assessment and Planning. One common trait of the libraries we visited was that decisions about what to do with library spaces and services were data driven, although the scope of the data collection ranged from very informal (pizza and focus groups) to very structured (Mellon foundation grant-supported research). For example, one library purchased new whiteboards on wheels. The librarians did not simply decide that more whiteboards would be a good idea. They observed student use of space over time, asked for student input, and made decisions accordingly. Another library we visited implemented an interesting postrenovation approach to feedback they solicited. They designed large posters to hang in the renovated space that mapped prerenovation patron feedback to new features or equipment available in the redesigned space. These posters helped to illustrate for the students that the feedback they provide was actually being used, and would hopefully encourage students to continue to provide input.

A variety of assessment tools and techniques was used to inform planning decisions at the libraries visited. Impromptu focus groups, informal student interviews, comments received via project blogs or Websites, furniture displays, design charts, feedback from Library Advisory Councils, space studies, and blank whiteboards or flipcharts with markers in high-traffic areas were all successfully used to gather feedback data. It is of particular importance to note that individual libraries often used multiple assessment tools, with varying degrees of intentionality, to gather information about their patrons' use of library spaces and patron preferences for the redesigned or renovated spaces. Collecting assessment information from users about learning spaces can help librarians make informed decisions, whether the changes are to be made within existing structures and spaces or if entirely new spaces are envisioned.

Developing a culture of assessment is important, although as illustrated above, it does not need to be full-scale formal assessment. For example, at

the OSU Libraries, we realized we missed a valuable informal assessment opportunity by consistently failing to note, upon arrival in the library each morning, how furniture had been rearranged the night before. Cultivating a mindset of assessment could have helped us to use this informal data collection to shape the revisioning of the learning commons project in our library.

Just Try It. Another way to rethink approaches to the commons is to bring a new philosophy to the planning process. Many of the libraries we visited had a “let’s try it” philosophy in place. For example, they would set up a card table and a computer to try a new reference desk configuration or cobble together a tutoring center out of unused cubicles. While several of these libraries had sufficient financial resources to implement costly renovations, they also saw the wisdom of trying out low budget solutions before attempting more expensive options. This “let’s try it” sensibility also kept these libraries from viewing changes as too big to tackle. Changing the entire reference desk configuration can sound like a daunting task. However, when the simple addition of a card table is all that is required to simulate this change, the task becomes much more achievable. Creative revisioning of commons’ principles can sometimes begin with the willingness to consider new ideas and to take simple steps to move those ideas forward.

Beyond the Commons. Rethinking the commons may also include consideration of other library spaces as smaller learning commons. With commons spaces generally designed around the model of support service, content, and technology combined in one easily accessible location, it makes sense to have a particular location or space designated as the learning commons. Students or other patrons working in the space have easy access to service points, technology, and certain types of content (e.g., print reference collections). However, with service points adding or maintaining virtual services (i.e., reference desk/tech desk/circulation desk chat), availability of laptop checkout and wireless printing, as well as the move of reference collections into the regular stacks, it is unnecessary for patrons to be physically present in the traditional commons space to make use of its services, content, and technology. Students can check out a laptop, meet up with friends in their favorite library location (perhaps the café), instant message or text a librarian to get help tracking down a reference, instant message the computer help desk to configure a software application, access online reference resources or obtain a needed reference resource from the stacks, send their completed project for printing via the wireless network, and never set foot in the commons except to pick up a print job before heading home in the wee hours of the morning.

Rather than thinking about the commons as a single destination, we need to start thinking that *wherever* students are in the library is now their learning commons. Reconfiguring the physical layout and amenities of other library spaces reinforces this idea. Yet, doing so does not necessarily mean undertaking large renovation projects.

REUSE IN THE COMMONS

Reusing furnishings, services, or collections is one of the simplest ways to create either a single commons space or several smaller commons spaces throughout the library. Using this technique, often in combination with the “just try it” philosophy, libraries can take advantage of resources already at hand to significantly increase the impact of the commons throughout the library without spending a lot of money. By reusing furniture and services as well as creating zones, libraries can also create a new aesthetic without substantial investment.

Woodward (2009) identifies many of the current library space, furnishing, and aesthetic issues as originating in the 1950s to 1970s. Plain lines, utilitarian furnishings, and lack of color were in stark contrast to the busy ornateness of earlier architecture. But this style leaves many cold, including our student patrons. Students desire more comfortable and engaging spaces that are designed and furnished “on a more human scale” (70).

Using furniture and accessories such as lamps and whiteboards to create zones is one way to bring some human scale into large, plain spaces. Furniture groupings can clearly identify the type of activity appropriate in the space. Mobile furnishings, if available, provide even more flexibility and allow furniture within a given zone to be arranged by the students themselves in whatever configuration suits their immediate needs. A table made for eight is overkill if the group has only three members. But smaller, movable tables can be rearranged to suit both small groups or combined with others to accommodate larger groups. While it might not be feasible for libraries, especially large institutions, to completely refurnish entire libraries in one fell swoop, reusing existing furnishings and implementing a phased approach to acquiring newer, more mobile furnishings can get this process started.

Libraries had, and still usually have, quiet floors, group study areas or reading rooms, and spaces dedicated to a particular type of activity or designed to appeal to different patron groups. Thus, “zoning” is not a new concept in libraries. The commons space is a particular type of zone. A concept from the commons that can be carried into other spaces is the creation of subzones within a larger space. Mixing soft seating and low tables for groups with group study tables and perhaps rolling white boards (our observations and conversations indicated these are well-used when available) to define these subzones creates spaces that are more human in scale. Some students prefer lounging on a couch or in an armchair even when involved with group work. Alternately, clusters of armchairs separated by side tables or lamps may be infinitely preferable for solo study than camping out in a warren of study carrels, even though they may be located nearby. Creating such furniture groupings can make a space seem more welcoming and gives students the option to choose seating that best suits their individual or group needs.

Using zones and furniture groupings to create human-scale spaces were prevalent at the libraries we visited. In one newer commons, the reference collection had been dramatically reduced, and the remaining collection was housed in tall bookshelves. These bookshelves were strategically placed around the perimeter of the commons and used to break up and redefine spaces. This contributed to a living room-like feel in some areas and created spaces that welcomed students to inhabit them.

In several of the libraries that had not undergone major remodeling projects, showcase spaces were built by combining a mix of new things, such as services or furnishings, with existing items or services, such as staffing or collections. In one of the libraries visited, whiteboards on wheels were purchased for a large study area. This area had previously been used for group study, but by enhancing the tables and seating already present with whiteboards, this area became even more of a draw for students wishing to work in study groups. This creative repurposing of resources and spaces has helped the learning spaces in these libraries remain vibrant and relevant over time without the disruption that can arise when large remodeling projects are implemented.

RECYCLING THE COMMONS

The notion of recycling spaces can be thought of in several different ways. Spaces can be recycled by transforming a space from one purpose to a completely new purpose, by creating flexible spaces that can be used for different purposes at different times of the term or year (or even different times of day in the case of special events), and by applying the concepts of the commons to other library spaces to enhance the usefulness or effectiveness of those spaces.

One way that spaces can be recycled is by evaluating what collections are most effective within commons spaces. The types of collections featured in the commons visited on this trip were varied. However, reduction of print reference collections was an overarching theme. Instead, collections that were much more relevant to the particular user group that was in the specific commons area were observed. For example, when undergraduate students were the primary user group, test preparation materials were made available. When graduate students were the primary user group, grant funding resources were given special space. In addition, when reference collections remained in the commons, the arrangement was much less formal than collections found in most libraries. The collection was housed in bookcases rather than in traditional shelving, and it was placed around the commons on exterior walls between and near furniture groupings to define spaces and to provide a much more informal feel. The collection became part of the furnishings of the commons and clear signage and labeling of each bookshelf invited unmediated use of these collections.

Pairing collections with technology available in the commons is another way to recycle collections and spaces. One featured collection we saw was located near the multimedia studio. This collection, displayed on video store-type racks, was made up of technology training videos. The collection was strategically placed near the multimedia studio. Low lighting, large monitors, various peripheral equipment, and individual desk lamps gave this space a distinctly edgy feel. The multimedia area was in stark contrast to the computing commons right around the corner—a bright, open, multistory space. However, the students occupying the multimedia space appeared to be right at home and intensely engrossed in their work.

Another collection shift observed was the special prominence given to browsing collections, which included travel books, popular fiction, CDs, and DVDs. These browsing collections were typically placed in high traffic areas, and, while new shelving was purchased for these collections, the space for these collections had simply been recycled for the browsing collection. Creating more informal collections is an additional idea that could be implemented outside a commons to highlight other pieces of a collection.

In addition to moving collections to create new spaces, considering how other rooms within the library are used can provide new opportunities for commons spaces. An example of recycling existing space comes from looking at a multimedia lab we visited. Instead of placing this lab in the main campus library, the lab was placed in a compact room off the main lobby of the undergraduate library, which is located on another part of campus close by. This library is at the heart of the “freshman” campus and thus perfectly suited to host this space.

Finally, at the risk of pushing the metaphor too far, people can also be recycled within the library. One interesting theme across multiple libraries we visited was the revisioning of library staff positions. One librarian, who exhibited particular skill in managing the tasks associated with the commons renovation, is now the building manager and handles all details associated with upkeep of the renovated space. At another library, a circulation staff member had a particular interest in one of the two learning commons and now oversees all operations in this commons space. At this same library, a subject librarian with an affinity for obtaining and exploring student input on the renovation project began to do just that on a full-time basis. Repurposing staff can serve to advance the goals of an institution, especially when individuals have a particular interest or skills in areas that need to be addressed.

Conclusion

OSU librarians returned from these information-gathering trips ready to rethink, reuse, and recycle in The Valley Library Learning Commons as well

as in other library spaces. In some cases, the trips validated decisions that had already been made, such as the decision to relocate the print reference collection. In the summer of 2009, the bulk of the print reference collection was moved to the circulating stacks, freeing up a significant amount of new space in the learning commons.

Rethinking the space formerly occupied by the print reference collection provides the perfect opportunity to implement the lessons learned on our information-gathering trips. There is a clear effort to make the next phase of development in the learning commons purposeful and data-driven. The space right now is largely empty; a few study tables and chairs have been moved from elsewhere in the library. A working group, headed by the Associate University Librarian for Innovative User Services, will oversee the next phase of development for this space. This group will include members from several public services departments in the library, including library technology, instruction and user services, and research and innovative services. They will be charged with creating a data-supported plan for the space, and their assessment will have a special focus on gathering student input. To this end, the Libraries have pursued partnerships with student leadership groups on campus. These partnerships provide the libraries with a way to connect with students repeatedly throughout the planning process.

While the learning commons working group will be making major decisions about technology, services, furnishings, and spaces in the existing commons, other projects in the library also illustrate the importance of reusing and recycling existing spaces and resources. During the regular term, The Valley Library classroom spaces are heavily used in traditional methods: information literacy sessions, student presentations, and staff trainings. In the evenings, however, these spaces sit empty while the rest of the building is buzzing with activity. Using partnerships with other campus units to meet with groups of students, librarians at OSU will brainstorm ideas about how to use these spaces in new ways during evening and weekend hours.

Although libraries still recognize and accommodate the needs of individual users, the learning commons can be replicated on a smaller scale throughout the library with targeted spaces for users with needs or characteristics in common. Graduate student lounges, multimedia production centers, and test preparation or career resources centers can be fit into small, existing library spaces. Viewing the entire library as a learning commons might best serve students with such diverse needs.

As campuses continue to add or enhance access to wireless networks (including in the library) and virtual learning spaces, library support services and library resources previously only accessible in designated commons spaces are increasingly accessible throughout the library (and across campus). As students gather to work in library spaces outside the formal commons, they will increasingly come to expect the human-scale environment and specialized amenities found in the commons in whatever library

space they choose to be *their* learning commons. The focus on a particular resource need or user characteristic places some natural limits on the upgrades needed in a given space and allows for easier creation of these smaller commons. In this way the library as a learning commons becomes more feasible for libraries that cannot build new structures or drastically remodel existing spaces.

Rethinking our approach to the learning commons is a logical response to a future that holds increased pressure on higher education budgets. Reusing space resources and recycling technology and collection resources to develop new and enhanced collaborative learning spaces requires creativity and vision—two of the very activities a learning commons is designed to inspire.

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