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Leveraging Strategic Institutional Partnerships: Creating a Phased Learning Commons at the University of Idaho Library

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Abstract

Following an energizing reorganization of the first floor, the University of Idaho Library sought additional strategies to support student learning and success. Building on previous successful collaborations with the Dean of Students Office, the Library and Tutoring Services created a model to offer peer-tutoring services in the library. Several philosophical and practical guidelines were considered, and implementation of the service, while challenging, was ultimately successful. Strategies for proposing, building, and maintaining similar partnerships with student services units are discussed, with best practices offered for other institutions seeking similar collaboration.

Keywords: Collaboration; Learning commons; Tutoring; Student services; Library space

Introduction

Although both the popularity and the value of information and learning commons in academic libraries has increased over the years, many institutions lack the resources necessary to create, support, and sustain these initiatives. The University of Idaho (UI) Library's mission¹ supports the holistic development of the student, and information literacy and other pedagogies suggest that students learn best when resources and services are centrally located, lowering barriers that may prevent students from asking for necessary help. Although creation of a learning commons at UI was a top priority, the economic collapse of 2008 prevented the administration from funding such an initiative. Undeterred, the Library began exploring creative ways to fund the creation of a commons, and successfully partnered with several units in the office of the Dean of Students to bring the dream of a library learning commons to fruition.

Literature Review

Library literature from the past two decades abounds with information about learning commons, which Beagle² defines as "collaboration with learning initiatives sponsored by other academic units, or aligned with learning outcomes defined through a cooperative process." The philosophy of teaching the whole student, when

paired with constructivist pedagogical tenets that maintain that students best create meaning in spaces outside the classroom, resulted in the creation of collaborative spaces in the library where students could find research, writing, computer, and other kinds of academic help.³ The shift towards collaborative student services coincided with the increased prioritization of group projects, interactive and multimedia assignments, and the blurring of academic and social lines with the development of social media. As MacWhinnie said a decade ago, "libraries have always provided study space, and are now including more group study facilities that have technology for access to both physical collection and electronic resources, as well as productivity software that allows students to work together to complete shared assignments."⁴ Sullivan emphasizes this increase in campus-wide initiatives and creative partnerships in her overview of library learning spaces,⁵ while Accardi, Cordova, and Leeder review learning models and note that "creativity and cooperation are key concepts leading to the success of LC partnerships."⁶

Partnerships between libraries and student services are also on the rise; as Tenofsky notes, "over the past decade, institutions of higher education have emphasized collaboration between academic and student service units on campus. Libraries, too, are positioning themselves to play



key roles in these collaborative efforts to meet the expectations of the Millennial student.”⁷ Schmidt and Kaufman reinforce this concept, stating that, “both librarians and student affairs professionals are motivated by a strong commitment to service and are involved in providing a range of programs and resources to students.”⁸ Walter and Eodice, however, caution that although collaboration is not inherently difficult, “building models for substantive and sustainable instructional programs designed in collaboration and based on complementary interests, however, is more complicated.”⁹ Love expands on this idea, noting that while “many campus libraries and student service organizations struggle with diminishing financial and human resources, rising student enrollments, and pressures to provide more services to an increasingly diverse student population,” collaboration between libraries and student affairs units can be successful since “both aim to equip students with tools and resources needed to succeed in their studies.”¹⁰ Libraries interested in similar initiatives will find many practical examples of collaboration, including best practices and guidelines, written about in library literature. Orgeron describes Loyola University’s collaboration with peer tutoring to create the Academic and Career Excellence Center, a “one stop student resource for referral to the appropriate academic assistance” which is staffed by peer tutors and is physically located near the reference desk.¹¹ Schmidt and Kaufman, in an article detailing the creation of a learning commons at the University of Guelph, highlight the role of peer educators in developing the Peer Helper Program and note that student perspectives help reinforce learning and build connections between peers.¹² Cummings describes outreach efforts by the Washington State University Libraries, including a number of programs tied to residence life and New Student Programs.¹³ Swartz, Carlisle, and Uyeki offer best practices gleaned from their experiences partnering with student affairs offices at the University of California Los Angeles, including the observation that “a shared exploratory attitude of openness and a positive approach are as vital to establishing and maintaining health collaborative relationships as following suggested guidelines.”¹⁴

Context

In 2009, the University of Idaho Library rearranged its first floor to create more opportunities for group study in response to patron needs, with the ultimate goal of transforming the first floor into a learning commons. To support a friendly and welcoming environment that was conducive to student learning, the library implemented a number of features. Whiteboard paint was applied to walls and movable whiteboards were purchased to encourage creative thinking and problem-solving, support students across disciplines, and provide space for visual learners. Modular, mobile furniture was purchased, including some soft seating, to create flexible seating configurations for students requiring spontaneous collaborative space. Finally, more electrical outlets were added to be used in conjunction with mobile seating, and to serve as additional charging stations for students with laptops or other mobile devices. These developments proved popular with students, although librarians felt that these physical improvements did not successfully transform the existing service model required to provide a learning commons atmosphere for students. The library explored various options and partnerships for expanding student services within the library, with an emphasis on building on the library’s existing strong relationship with the Dean of Students Office. After some examination of the programs offered by the Dean of Students Office, it became clear that the most practical and strategically aligned in-library collaboration was with the Tutoring and Academic Assistance Program (TAAP), a division of Student Affairs within the Dean of Students Office.

Philosophical Considerations

A successful campus partnership depends on three things: that units have similar student-centered philosophies, share similar goals for the project or partnership, and are willing to equally contribute resources to the success of the project.

A guiding priority in the UI Library Strategic Plan 2011-2015 is to “enable student success in a rapidly changing world through transformed teaching and learning” by developing “integra-

tive learning activities that span students' entire university experience."¹⁵ Realizing that student learning is not confined to the classroom or the library, librarians at UI make it a priority to provide outreach to students through other initiatives. These have included staffing a table at recruitment fairs during "Vandal Fridays," presenting relevant information to incoming freshman and transfer students at New Student Orientation; co-presenting with TAAP staff during multi-session Parent Orientations; and participating in the University's "Common Read" program, serving as discussion facilitators. Librarians are also active partners within the University's First Year Experience program, and are integrated into Core Curriculum and English 102, reaching the majority of each year's incoming class through library instruction. Similarly, the TAAP's mission is to assist students in reaching their educational goals while at the university, through study skills workshops, individual and group tutoring, and disability support services.¹⁶ Both units share student-centered philosophies, guided by missions and values that support student learning in and out of the classroom. In addition to viewing student service as a core part of their professional identity, both librarians and tutoring coordinators identify their primary role as facilitation of student success and view themselves as being uniquely qualified to help students in their academic journeys. Expanding on this concept, Swartz, Carlisle and Uyeki note that one of the unique features of student services partnerships is that "some of the obstacles to faculty/librarian collaborations are not present....without these obstacles, it is easier for librarians and student services professionals to regard each other as experts in their respective fields and as valuable partners."¹⁷ The ability to recognize the expertise of each unit, when combined with similar attitudes towards student success, proved invaluable in creating an atmosphere for collaboration.

Once librarians and TAAP staff established a similarity in viewpoint and philosophy, they explored potential for shared goals. The first and most pressing goal for both units was one of space. The library envisioned a partnership that would facilitate the integration of new services such as tutoring into the already transformed physical space on the first floor, allowing a true

learning commons to emerge. TAAP was restricted in the growth of its programs by a lack of space in its existing building, and was hoping to expand tutoring services to other centrally located buildings on campus, which would allow TAAP to increase the number of tutoring sessions offered, as well as lifting the cap on number of students per tutoring session. These mutually conducive goals were a good fit for each unit, but also supported a larger goal of both units, one shared by university administration; increasing student recruitment and retention. Studies have shown that libraries can impact student persistence, and that creating engaging learning environments positively affects student persistence.¹⁷ In addition to supporting campus initiatives, the library also bolstered recruitment efforts by providing library instruction to area high schools with minimal library access at their own institutions, and supported retention by providing instruction to extracurricular groups and academic fraternities, as well as embedding librarians in liaison areas to support subject-specific research needs. These goals are heavily supported and advocated for by the Dean of Students office. Both the library and TAAP felt that increasing the presence of academic assistance in the library would further support university goals, and the creation of a vibrant workspace would encourage students to use the library.

After establishing philosophical viewpoints and strategic goals, the library and TAAP discussed practical matters such as resource allocation and projected costs to establish what each unit would be able to contribute to the endeavor. Like many universities, the University of Idaho was navigating a state budget crisis and its attendant effects on department funding and staffing, and as a result, careful allocation of resources was paramount. As Swartz et. al. note about their experience in a similar economic climate, "it was important to define the scope of the project carefully while considering the goals and priorities of the Library, the Office of the Dean of Students, and the University. No one desired to overcommit, or promise what could not be delivered; all desired to develop a valuable and useful resource to help students succeed."¹⁸ Both the library and TAAP were willing to contribute human and fiscal resources to

secure the success of the project, with the Dean of the Library and the Dean of Students office contributing equally to the projected costs of the project. The Reference Coordinator was assigned to oversee the transition, and worked with the Tutoring Coordinators on issues of space, budget, and resources.

Implementation and Assessment

In Fall 2011, TAAP officially began offering services in the library. Students could visit a number of drop-in sessions facilitated by peer tutors, or, if no drop-in sessions were offered, request special small group sessions with peer tutors. Tutoring sessions spanned disciplines, offering help for subjects such as chemistry, art, engineering, and foreign languages. Six tables on the first floor were designated for drop-in tutoring; schedules were posted at the reference desk and on the library home page, and librarians often helped students find their group or tutor. Although tutoring in the library experienced some growing pains during its first semester in the new location, by the second semester the program was running smoothly. Statistics from TAAP show that during Spring 2012, 160 individual tutoring assignments were provided, comprising 1,025 contact hours; drop-in tutoring sessions were popular as well, reaching 519 students during 366 hour-long sessions.¹⁹ An interview with the Tutoring Coordinator indicated that the library was a popular tutoring location among students and tutors because of its central and familiar location on campus, as well as the fact that the library's interdisciplinary nature created an accessible environment for students of all majors. The flexibility of the physical space in the library was also cited as a cause for popularity, as tutors could meet with large groups on the first floor, or find another location on the second floor if quieter study was needed. In addition, the Tutoring Coordinator noted that thanks to the efforts of all parties, the move from a previous location did not feel like "a consolation prize. We really like being here."²⁰

Assessment from the library point of view also supports the success of the program; library gate counts increased by 5% in the first year of tutoring, and 12% in the second year. Whether these students were primarily seeking tutoring ser-

vices or simply responding to the rejuvenated atmosphere on the first floor, the result was an increase in foot traffic and use of library spaces. During the first year of the collaboration, from Fall 2011 to Fall 2012 (including summer 2012), librarians were asked to informally record their observations of the first floor space in the department's reference statistics tracking software. Although anecdotal, 61% of observations²¹ indicated that the learning commons was busy or otherwise being actively used by study groups. Comments supporting the increased use of the space included those such as, "First floor is jam packed; constant flow of people in and out," "several good-sized tutoring groups tonight, as well as other clusters of students filling most of the tables; lots of whiteboard users," "standing room only in the group study area," and even, "a tutoring carnival back there."

While some meaning can be gleaned from informal assessment attempts such as observation and inferred from the numbers provided by measures such as tutoring statistics, gate counts, and reference statistics, a formal assessment of the effects of tutoring on student learning outcomes is still needed. As in any collaborative effort, both TAAP and the library will need to contribute resources, skills, and time in order to make formal assessment of tutoring services' presence in the Learning Commons a priority. One potential method for assessment is a survey distributed to both peer tutors and tutees; another may consist of focus groups for students who use the group study area, including those students affiliated with tutoring and those using the space in an informal capacity. Pending the results of this assessment, the library will explore future partnerships with other external units on campus, such as collaborating with the Writing Center to offer writing assistance in the library, or partnering with Information Technology Services to offer co-sponsored instruction sessions on software frequently used by students.

Challenges Encountered

Although the integration of tutoring services into library space had positive benefits, the implementation was not without challenges, of both philosophical and practical natures. The

library administration shared a similar mission and vision with the administrative staff at the Tutoring Center, but these shared values did not translate to a shared service philosophy between public services librarians and peer tutors. Being uninvolved in the daily operations of tutoring activities, and having minimal acquaintance with the students who comprised the large pool of peer tutors, reference librarians often felt at a loss when asked about tutoring specifics by patrons at the reference desk. Students seeking tutors may mistakenly fault the library for posting outdated tutoring hours, not knowing where a specific tutor is, or for a tutor not showing up for a scheduled session. Although librarians were not provided information to answer these questions for patrons, the ultimate outcome is the same; a question was unanswered at the reference desk. Although most patrons understood, the casual attitudes of peer tutors and the reflection of their service philosophy on the perceived usefulness of the reference desk was problematic, in both the short and long term. Several practical initiatives were undertaken to assuage the effects of these philosophical differences; dedicated space was provided to tutoring services to minimize missed connections by students and peer tutors, persistent links to updated tutoring schedules were posted on the library homepage for librarians to consult, and the Reference Coordinator worked with the transitional tutoring administration to develop more informal and open lines of communication and to build personal relationships with the Tutoring Coordinators.

There were also some unforeseen challenges of a practical nature that arose during the integration of Tutoring Services on the first floor of the library. While there were some minor logistical difficulties involving keys, cabinets, and dry-erase markers, the larger practical challenge was the displacement of noise to quiet spaces on the third and fourth floors, resulting from a higher demand for group study spaces on the first and second floors. This disruption in atmosphere on previously quiet floors initially caused conflict among students, but with improved signage, gentle reminders by reference librarians, and isolating study spaces on the third and fourth floors, the problem has largely abated. Some of this may be due to growing pains, as a year later

students are more familiar with the arrangement and have settled into new study areas.

Recommendations for Other Libraries

Although establishing a learning commons with external partners proved to be challenging at times, the effort was well rewarded by the positive effects of the dynamic space and increased service to students. Other libraries wishing to explore similar partnerships at their own institutions should keep the following considerations in mind when developing a strategy for collaboration.

Administration

Before seeking external partners, verify that the library has both the human and fiscal resources to dedicate to any project. Librarians should not underestimate the time it may take to implement a new project, especially when working with multiple units on campus. Administrative support from the library will be critical to the success of any project, and should be confirmed before proceeding. Similarly, is there administrative support at the campus level for the project? Some questions to ask:

- Is there library administrative support for the project?
- What space, time, staffing, and funds can be dedicated to the project?
- Does the project support the goals of the library strategic plan?
- Is there campus administrative support for the project?
- Does the project support the goals of the campus strategic plan?

Partners

Which units on campus would be a natural fit for collaboration? Good candidates for collaboration are often rooted in pre-existing strong relationships, share the same basic goals, and each have an unmet need. Collaboration, when done well, is a time-intensive and intimate process, and time spent identifying mutually beneficial partners is a valuable exercise. Some questions to ask:



- Do our missions align?
- Are we both committed to student learning as our first priority?
- Does our partnership serve the larger university's mission? Support campus culture?
- Are our philosophies similar? Do we both have the same foundation of expectations from students?
- Are our student learning outcomes similar?
- Do we have similar service models? Will students have a bad experience at one service point/with one unit and will it reflect poorly on the other unit?
- Will units be able to collaborate and cross-refer? What benefit does collaboration bring to each unit of the partnership?
- What can each unit contribute? Think of it like grant funding: if not money, what about in-kind contributions? Perhaps furniture, cross-promotions, etc.

Practical Considerations

Once a positive external partnership has been identified and meetings have been held to discuss the theoretical implications for each unit, logistical matters should be considered. Although it may be difficult to hypothesize about the future of a project before it has begun, thoughtful analysis of the following questions in the planning stages can forestall time-consuming debates further down the road. For example:

- Will there be adequate space, time, staffing, and resources dedicated to the implementation and also to the maintenance of the project?
- When will the new service be available?
- Who will be responsible for supervising the service or project?
- Who will staff the service? Librarians, library staff, or staff from external units?
- Who will be responsible for marketing the new service?
- What are the space requirements? Are any modifications to existing space needed? Desired?
- How will we assess the success of the project or service?

- What if the project or service is not a success; who determines when to pull the plug?

Conclusion

Collaborating with campus partners outside the library can be a productive and positive endeavor for all parties involved, and, more importantly, can benefit student learning while helping universities reach larger strategic goals. The University of Idaho Library's learning commons was a successful partnership for the library and its partners for several reasons. First, the partnership was founded on a shared goal of achieving strategic planning outcomes, including increasing student recruitment and retention and providing a space that encourages interdisciplinary and collaborative research and study. Second, all units shared a similar student-centered philosophy of service, believing that supporting students in their academic careers and beyond was critical to their mission. Third, both external collaborators and the library displayed a willingness to contribute both human and fiscal resources to help the project achieve fruition, and participated fully in efforts to adapt to new or unmet needs while continuously evaluating service provided. The library also underwent some serious self-examination in determining the role of the research library on a university campus, and worked to change outdated or inaccurate established campus perceptions of the library to support the project. Each unit worked to promote the services of other units, thereby reaching students previously unaware of the academic assistance available to them. As beneficial as the partnership was for the library and for tutoring services, the true beneficiaries of the project are the students.

Endnotes

¹ <http://www.lib.uidaho.edu/aboutus/mission.html>

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¹⁴ P. S. Swartz, B. A. Carlisle and E. C. Uyeki, "Libraries and Student Affairs: Partners for Student Success," *Reference Services Review* 35, no. 1 (2007): 109-122.

¹⁵ University of Idaho Library Strategic Plan 2011-2015
http://www.lib.uidaho.edu/pdf/Library_Strategic_Plan_2011_2015.pdf

¹⁶ Tutoring and Academic Assistance Program Mission:
<http://www.uidaho.edu/studentaffairs/asap>

¹⁷ M. Emmons and F. C. Wilkinson, "The Academic Library Impact on Student Persistence," *College & Research Libraries* 72, no. 8 (2011): 128-149.

¹⁸ P. S. Swartz, B. A. Carlisle and E. C. Uyeki, "Libraries and Student Affairs: Partners for Student Success," *Reference Services Review* 35, no. 1 (2007): 109-122.

¹⁹ Personal correspondence, J. Clevy.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ninety of 147 observations, recorded from 9/1/2011 to 11/1/2012 (stop date was due to change in statistics providers).