The Information Commons

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

A new service model is emerging in academic libraries. Called the "Information Arcade," "Information Hub," "Information Commons," and other similar names, this model brings together resources and services typically found in an academic library's reference department and the campus computer lab. This is an evolving way of offering resources and assistance not found in one area, but being sought by users in both areas.

In September 2002, the Pew Internet & American Life project released the study *The Internet Goes to College*[1] which explored the impact the Internet has had on the daily life of a typical college student. Computers and Web-based resources are now a routine part of the daily life of students. Seventy-three percent of students surveyed reported that they use the Internet more than they use the library and seventy-nine percent stated that the Internet has had a positive impact on their academic experience.

Libraries have responded to the academic community's increasing dependence on computer technology by developing online public access catalogs and purchasing online databases, electronic books, and journals. However, for many college students this is still not enough. They want access to all the different tools needed to write a research paper, assignment, thesis, or complete a class project. They don't want to have to go to the library to do the research or to pick up materials and then go to the computer lab (sometimes in another building on campus) to write the paper. Students want to work on their projects from start to finish in one area. In response, libraries have started to explore possible partnerships with others in the campus community to develop services that combine computer access and research assistance. The result is the "Information Commons."

The library literature includes several articles about the development of the information commons (IC) and has looked at how individual ICs are functioning on their respective campuses. However, no one has published a comprehensive survey that looks at how this new service model fits into the existing framework of user assistance offered in academic and research libraries today. This survey fills that gap. In addition, it seeks to explore how the information commons is staffed and what training is needed to help staff members transition into this new service area.

Seventy-four of the 123 ARL member libraries (60%) responded to the survey. Of these, 22 (30%) have an information commons in their library. The respondents' answers provide a clearer picture of the elements that make up an information commons, as well as the personnel issues to consider.

IC Creation and Promotion

The creation of ICs is a fairly recent phenomenon. Only five of the reported ICs were established before 1995. Eight were established between 1996 and 2000 and nine opened between 2002 and 2004.

Of the 22 libraries with an IC, 45% indicated that the primary driving factor behind its creation was a decision by the library's administration. Respondents commented that factors such as opportunities to create a "visible impact" on student learning, reorganization of public service points in the building, and response to user demands—both expressed and observed—were also driving factors in establishing an IC in their library. The names of these new service areas vary, though half have "Commons" as part of their name.

Twenty of the respondents (91%) publicized or promoted the information commons prior to its opening. All but four used the library Web site in conjunction with a variety of other promotional channels. The second most commonly used promotional method was posters. In addition to the Web and posters, the majority of respondents also employed press releases, e-mail messages, speeches, and stories in the media. The four libraries that didn't use the Web relied on e-mail, ads in campus media, press releases, and posters. The three most often targeted audiences for publicity and promotion were undergraduates (100%), faculty (85%), and graduate students (75%).

Funding and Budget

At thirteen of the responding libraries (59%), start-up funding for the IC came from a reallocation of existing library funds, while ten (45%) were able to obtain new funding from the legislature or parent institution, and nine (41%) received money from a private donor. Ten respondents used only one funding option; the remainder relied on a combination of funding sources. Five combined new money from the parent institution and private donors with reallocated library funds. Five others used student fees together with library funds. One library stated that their IC is a joint partnership between the library and their university's technology services division and the IC is supported by and equipment was purchased with funds from both.

The majority of the libraries (17 or 81%) do not maintain a separate budget for the IC. The four libraries that do maintain separate budgets reported annual budgets ranging from $385,000 to $1,550,000 with an average of $1,100,000. Most of the information commons budget is used to purchase hardware ($280,000 on average) and staff the service ($190,000). Supplies (for photocopying, scanning, and printing) and computer software (to cover the cost of licenses, upgrades, etc.) are the next highest expenses, averaging $49,000 and $45,000, respectively.

Facilities and Services

The physical spaces that existing ICs occupy range from 1,600 square feet to over 40,000 square feet. The average size is 7,193 square feet. The average number of computers available for patrons to use is 111, though the number ranges from a minimum of 36 to a maximum of 400. A significant number of ICs can be found on the library's main floor (10 or 45%) and the majority maintain hours similar to the hours found in the rest of the library (18 or 82%). Nine of the respondents (43%) indicated that existing service points were combined to create the IC and twelve (57%) reported that a new unit was created.

Office space for IC staff is more often included in new units, otherwise there is almost no difference in the services and resources found in combined and newly created ICs. The most common components include a computer help desk, a reference desk, and individual consultations with staff at both; ADA assistance and/or assistive devices; a reference collection; and printers, scanners, public access workstations, and loaner laptops. Other components include a computer lab; group study rooms and group consultations; photocopy machines; and audio-visual facilities. A few units include service points for circulation, reserves, interlibrary loan, and government documents.

While many reference tools are available electronically, there are still materials available only in print format or still heavily used by patrons in print format. Sixty-four percent of respondents indicated that they have a print reference collection available in the IC and that it also serves as the main reference collection for the rest of the library. The most commonly found print reference tools in the IC are general encyclopedias and dictionaries (86%), foreign language dictionaries (86%), writing

style guides (79%), computer handbooks (79%), and biographical resources (71%).

In addition to supplying access to the library's research tools, ICs also provide access to productivity software. All of the responding libraries indicated that they offer Web browser software. Over 90% offer spreadsheet, word processing (or text editing), and multimedia/presentation software, Netscape plug-ins, and suites of office programs to their patrons. In addition, over 70% also provide access to scanning, utilities programs, and graphics. Sixty-four percent stated that they have software available for students at the request of faculty. Finally, 23% of the respondents provide games on the computers in the IC.

About half of the ICs have a single service point; the rest have between two and four. Each of the multiple service points offers different services ranging from laptop distribution to reference assistance, computer assistance, circulation, and reserves. Respondents noted that services are not duplicated; each desk has a specific purpose. The five most used services are printers and public access computer workstations, followed by the computer help desk, reference desk, and computer lab.

Service Transaction Statistics

Nearly two-thirds of the libraries keep transaction statistics for the IC. These averaged 4,900 transactions per month. In the course of a month, the ICs averaged 1,800 reference questions and 1,350 directional questions. Computer software assistance was sought an average of 775 times and hardware assistance was asked for 163 times. Other types of transactions include personal computer reservations and unspecified computer assistance. The authors are not sure how this assistance differs from the computer hardware and software categories listed in the survey question, but conclude that approximately 25% of transactions at the information commons involve computer assistance.

Personnel

One of the key elements to the success of an IC is the mix of staff available to answer patrons' questions. With only a few exceptions, the respondents rely on a mix of full- and part-time staff of all categories. Of the 20 respondents, 18 use part-time staff, 15 use full-time staff, and 8 use on-call staff. Eighteen employ student assistants who work part time. Seventeen employ support staff, twelve full time, nine part time, and two on call. Seventeen staff the IC with librarians, twelve full time, eight part time, and three on call. Eleven rely on information technology (IT) staff, seven full time, five part time, and five on call. Only seven respondents use non-library staff in the IC, four full time, two part time, and three on call. Information commons staff at 17 libraries (77%) rove their service areas; at ten of these they identify themselves with badges. Staff at one library wear a uniform; at another they wear baseball-type shirts and badges.

While the majority of ICs rely on a wide variety of staff categories to cover their operations, there are a few interesting exceptions. Three ICs have no librarians on staff. One of these uses on-call IT staff only. Another employs full-time, part-time, and on-call IT staff and students. The third uses full-time IT and support staff and students. Two ICs manage with part-time staff only; another two with part-time and on-call staff. The number of staff employed in the ICs ranges from .5 FTE to 50 FTE. The higher FTE counts are found in the student, support staff, and librarian categories while the IT and non-library staff categories fall below 5 FTE each. Overall, student assistants put in the most hours each week in the IC followed by support staff. Librarians and IT staff work roughly 35 to 40 hours a week, on average.

Survey respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the current staffing arrangement. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being lowest and10 highest, 20 libraries (91%) rated their satisfaction level at six or above.

Fourteen respondents (67%) indicated that job descriptions of existing staff were redefined to accommodate the requirements of working in the information commons, while nine (43%) created new library positions and four (19%) created new computer center positions for the IC. Eight libraries (38%) reassigned staff from other departments to work in the IC and redefined their job descriptions. Two of these also created new library and computer

center positions. Of the six other libraries that redefined positions, three also created new library positions. A fourth started a peer assistant program for student workers. One library that created a new library position filled it from existing staff, one conducted an outside search, and three others used both strategies. Another library reallocated a vacant library position to create a new computer center position for the IC.

Although there is no consensus on the title for the supervisor of the IC, 74% hold degrees in library or information science. About half of the supervisors were recruited from existing library staff; only four libraries (21%) conducted an outside search. The supervisor most often reports to an assistant or associate library director (8 or 44%), though quite a few report directly to the library director (6 or 33%).

Staff Training

In preparation for staffing the IC, 68% of the responding libraries developed a specific training program for the library and IT staff. A wide variety of training was offered to all categories of IC workers. Most of the libraries (16 or 76%) tailored their training programs to meet the needs of the types of employees working in the IC. Respondents noted that training was targeted to enhance and expand the skills that individuals already possessed.

Training for the librarians and the library support staff concentrated mainly on reference skills, library policies and procedures, database knowledge, and customer service. In addition, 72% of library support staff received training on troubleshooting the computers and peripherals. The IT staff's training focused on customer service skills, library policies and procedures, and software applications. Only a few of the 20 respondents indicated that their IT staff received any kind of training on how to use the library's catalog or how to do a reference interview. Not surprisingly, student assistants working in the IC received the most comprehensive training. Their training covered everything from basic library information to computer troubleshooting.

Seventeen of the libraries (81%) ranked their satisfaction with the current training program at six or above on a scale of 1 to 10. When asked what changes they would make to improve the program, respondents suggested less specialized training on specific applications and more training on customer service and information literacy. They also recommended hiring students with technical skills and letting full-time library staff focus their attention on reference questions.

Evaluation

Sixty-three percent of the respondents have evaluated their information commons services. Popular methods of evaluation include informal feedback from users (12 or 86%), a formal paper-based evaluation survey (8 or 57%), and a computer-based survey (7 or 50%). Other methods include focus groups, observation, and feedback from staff and student assistants. Ten of the fourteen respondents use a combination of informal feedback, paper-based surveys, and computer-based surveys to gather feedback.

High levels of patron satisfaction were indicated in the areas of hours of service, selection of equipment, selection of software, computer assistance, resources and collections, reference service, and amount of workspace. Satisfaction declined in the areas of number of seats available, number of group study rooms, and availability of equipment for checkout. Consequently, some services were expanded, some were eliminated, and others were adjusted for improvement. Eleven libraries (85%) added more hardware and eight (62%) added different software. In addition, respondents expanded laptop lending, introduced color printing, increased roving, and initiated chat reference service.

Conclusion

This survey was designed to gather data that would provide readers a clearer picture of the information commons being developed and run in academic research libraries today. As expected, there are some variations in the services offered, but overall the majority of the libraries focus on providing students with a place in the library where they can do their research from start to finish. Although the respondent group (libraries with an established information commons) was small, no library

indicated that creating an information commons had been a mistake. And while the number of existing information commons is small, the interest is quite large as libraries explore ways to respond to user demand for more technology in addition to the traditional services found in most academic libraries. This SPEC Kit provides an overview of the early development of information commons in academic settings and provides a roadmap to help other libraries design services that will meet the needs of their own academic communities.

[1] Jones, Steve. "The Internet Goes to College: How Students Are Living in the Future with Today's Technology." Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2002. The report is available at http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_College_Report.pdf.