A Learning Commons: Collaboration with Academic Support

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抄録: This article describes the Learning Commons at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The Learning Commons provides a user-centered comfortable place for students to study and collaborate. Centralized campus services that provide advising, career counseling, writing assistance, reference and research assistance, technical support along with refreshments help students succeed in their educational endeavors. The emphasis is on the student. Services, as well as behavior policies, are designed to enhance easy, "one-stop" access to academic support and library resources.

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UMASS LEARNING COMMONS ESTABLISHED

After a significant amount of planning and renovations of space, the Learning Commons located at the W.E.B. Du Bois Library at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst officially opened to students for the fall semester of 2005. The Learning Commons extends throughout the 28 floor red brick tower centrally located on the approximately 25,000 undergraduate and graduate populated western Massachusetts campus. Today, encompassing over 25,000 square feet, the Learning Commons provides student-centered space containing:

- 200 multipurpose workstations (PCs and Macs); 58 of which are for public use
- 400+ ports for laptop network access to campus network and the Internet
- Wireless access Lower Level through the 5th Floor plus 13th Floor
- 24 Gateway tablet PCs and 30 Dell laptops for 4-hour student check-out
- Copying, printing (B&W and color), faxing, scanning, UCard (student ID card) transfer station
- Licensed software and web-based course materials
- Technology support and reference and research assistance
- Physical and online library collections and services
- Non-library academic support services such as writing, academic advising, career services, tutoring, and assistive technologies

Staffed by a multitude of librarians, information technology personnel, student assistants, and student tutors, as well as providing 24 hours 5 days a week (Sunday 11 a.m. – Friday 9 p.m., Saturday 9 a.m. – 9 p.m.) service and a café, the Learning Commons is a welcoming gathering place for studying and socializing in the center of the campus.

MISSION STATEMENT

The physical space as well as service model reflects the mission statement of the Learning Commons at UMass:

As the heart of UMass Amherst, the Learning Commons (LC) provides a welcoming, flexible, and student-focused environment. Rich in services and technologies, the LC fosters community, innovation, and the creation of new knowledge. With long hours, peer support, and a relaxed and inclusive atmosphere, the LC encourages students to make the most of their educational experience. Campus service providers pool their expertise to provide convenient access to the core academic support services that enable students to succeed and excel at UMass Amherst. The LC strives to assist students to become self-directed learners and engaged adults to build a better future.

Several services are conveniently located throughout the Learning Commons to provide one-stop service points to users. The Learning Commons and Technical Support Desk, staffed by library and technology assistants, provides seamless assistance to students in the use of computers, software, printers, copiers, scanners, fax machine,
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UCard machine, office supply, snack, and beverage vending machines, directional assistance as well as basic reference help. The combination of desk staff from the Library and Office of Information Technologies (OIT) provides students with combined expertise that can assist with a broad range of questions. The Reference and Research Assistance Desk is located nearby the LC Desk and is staffed by professional (graduate degree) librarians (including subject specialists) and one highly experienced paraprofessional. Having the LC Desk within close proximity allows the librarians to devote their time to assisting users with in-depth reference questions while the LC Desk assistants tackle the issues of troubleshooting computers, printers, and copiers. Prior to the creation of the LC, reference librarians spent large amounts of time troubleshooting equipment; this is no longer so.

PHYSICAL OVERVIEW OF THE LC

On entering the W.E.B. Du Bois Library, one encounters the Building Monitors Desk, the General Information Desk, and Procrastination Station (café). The Building Monitor Desk is staffed by library employees as well as student assistants. The Building Monitors are responsible for all building issues, including safety, security, maintenance, and emergency calls concerning building operations. The staff and student assistants at the Building Monitor Desk perform regular patrols throughout the building. They serve as a central communication station for library building issues and contact the Physical Plant (the University’s building and facilities department) as needed. Other duties performed by the Building Monitor employees are to monitor the collection security gates as well as record gate counts, assist users of the self-checkout machines, and call the walking-escort service for patrons. The desk is staffed the same 24/5 hours as the LC and Building Monitor staff regularly work collaboratively with the supervisors of the LC Desk.

The General Information Desk staff provides immediate general directional assistance. Procrastination Station (named by a student in a contest) is a café that sells drinks and snacks; an area with tables provides a pleasant space for people to gather and collaborate while having a beverage. Also located on this floor is the New Book Shelf; each week the newly-acquired books are displayed here. Circulation and Stacks Management are also located on this floor. Quick lookup computers are available here for those who want to find a call number for a book before they head to the open stacks to retrieve it. Self-checkout machines by the front doors enable users to check out their own books using their student ID card.

One level below the entrance level is the primary area of the LC where the public and student computers are located along with the Learning Commons and Technical Support Desk, Research and Reference Assistance Desk, Writing Center, Academic Advising Link, and Career Services Desks. Also found on this floor are the Assistive Technology Center and the Calipari Library Instruction Room, a computer classroom. Along with the over 200 available computers, students have 17 glass rooms in which to gather together to work on group projects. Users of laptops may avail themselves of several tables which have portable electric power poles. (Note: all of the furniture in the LC is designed for portability to enable future physical arrangement changes and students are encouraged to move chairs and tables to create collaborative groupings on the fly).

Quiet, individual study areas are on floors two and three of the Library. Students have ample study tables in which to use their laptops (wireless is available on floors 1-5 as well as floor 13). Reserves, Media and Microfilms, located on the third floor, is also open the same 24/5 hours as the LC. Located on the tenth floor is the Learning Resource Center where peer tutoring is available.

CAMPUS SERVICES COMPLEMENT LIBRARY SERVICES

The Writing Center, located in the South West end of the LC, operates out of a large glass enclosure with four PC-equipped tutoring tables, a manager’s office, a tutor break cubicle, and an intake desk. Staffed with students, the Writing Center is open to accept walk-in students. Recently launched is an appointment management system whereby students can sign up online for appointments. Individual writing consultations last up to 45 minutes
and provide assistance with all types of writing tasks from term papers to resumes to cover letters to dissertations. The service is free and open to faculty, students, and staff of the campus. Since the Writing Center moved into the Learning Commons, international and English as a Second Language students are taking full advantage of this support service. The close proximity of the Writing Center to the Reference and Research Assistance Desk has allowed for closer collaboration between the Writing Center tutors and the librarians. Librarians send students to the Writing Center for help with their papers while writing tutors send students to the librarians for help in gathering reliable resources for their work.

Situated side-by-side at a single desk are the Academic Advising Link and Career Services. The Academic Advising Link, staffed with student
assistants, provides students with major and course selection advice, SPIRE help (UMass's course registration system), degree progress audits, help with General Education Requirements, and information about international programs. Career Services dispenses information on: potential employers; resume, interviewing, and cover letter preparation; career choice; and field internships. Career Services also presents job search workshops in the Calipari Library Instruction Room. These services are complementary in that students planning their course schedules can also easily take into account how their chosen discipline will affect their careers.

For the convenience of students who need adaptive equipment, the Assistive Technologies Center (ATC) occupies a room on the Lower Level of the W.E.B. Du Bois Library. Most adaptive software is licensed by the OIT for the entire campus and is available on all authenticated computers on campus. Students gain access to the Assistive Technologies Center by registering with Disability Services on campus. Book readers, scanners, speech synthesizers, text recognition software and more are available for use in the ATC. The Learning Commons and Technical Support Desk provides support for users of the ATC. A full-time consultant will be available to assist inside the room beginning in fall 2008.

The Calipari Library Instruction Room (another computer classroom maintained by OIT) consists of approximately 20 computers. This room is scheduled by the library for information literacy instruction by librarians and teaching assistants sessions for freshman writing courses; however, whenever it is not scheduled, this room is used as additional drop-in computer space for students.

Reserves, Media, and Microforms, located on floor three, is where students go to use class reserves material along with microforms, DVDs, and library laptop checkout (50 laptops are currently available for checkout). The Learning Resource Center, located on the tenth floor of the W.E.B. Du Bois Library, offers students a non-judgmental, peer-supported environment in which to get individual assistance with particularly challenging courses. Student/peer tutors are undergraduate students who do well in difficult subjects and are paid to tutor others in that field. The Learning Resource Center also provides Supplemental Instruction (SI) as lead by peer instructors who have done particularly well in hard-to-pass courses such as Biology, Chemistry, Math, and Physics. Students who have already successfully completed one of these courses are paid $10 per hour to re-take the course and work closely with the faculty member to support other students through the coursework. The student provides two 90-minute sessions per week for currently-enrolled students to go over homework, answer questions, and provide test review sessions. Higher grades have been received by many students who have voluntarily attended the SI seminars.

POLICIES FOR AND BY THE STUDENTS

LC policies are designed to reflect the needs and desires of the students. User Behavior Policies, posted on the Learning Commons website, set the behavior standards and the atmosphere of the LC as a student-centered space. When developing the policies, the philosophy of "students first" was considered. Users are expected above all else to adhere to behaviors that provide a safe and respectful environment for study and learning. Policies are reviewed often and can be changed, depending upon needs and concerns of the users. Users of the LC are encouraged to remind others of the policies when behavior is disruptive or they may approach the Learning Commons and Technical Support desk staff for assistance.

The lower level of the LC is designated as a collaborative area. Students are reminded, via signage, to turn cell phones onto quiet mode although there are no restrictions as to cell phone usage in the LC. Sound-proof cell phone booths are provided for students who wish to make a phone call without interrupting others at work; ironically, many students use the booths in order to not have their phone conversation interrupted by others. Students are expected to keep conversations within reasonable noise levels. New visitors to the LC often whisper and are told that the lower level of the LC is not a quiet area and that discussions are allowed.

Initially, the LC did not allow food. However, it
became evident that students wanted to be able to remain in the building for long periods. It appeared that many students, upon leaving the building for refreshments, did not return. LC staff found it impossible to enforce the “no food” policy as students were ignoring it. The policy has been eliminated without adverse effects. Food deliveries must be met outside of the library. Procrastination Station, the snack bar, offers hot and cold beverages, bagels, pastries, fruit, salads, and energy bars. It is open into the early morning hours as this is a favorite study time for students. Vending machines offer drinks and snacks during all building hours and are refilled on a daily basis.

The Learning Commons fills a need for today’s university students for a place they can be comfortable and call their own. Building traffic is consistently up 30% per month over the same month of the previous year (even 2 years after its opening) because students come to both socialize (they run into all of their friends in the Learning Commons) and to work independently and in groups on academic projects. The presence of a comprehensive suite of academic support services open the hours students are studying ensures students can be efficient with their time. Staff and student assistants use their training and customer service skills to remove blockades to accomplishing academic goals. The facility attracts a diverse population of students – a higher percentage of minority students frequent the Learning Commons than their percentage in the campus population – and supports students to navigate the complex systems of a large university to find the right major, complete their academic tasks, and graduate prepared for a successful future.

Links:
Learning Commons Website: http://www.umass.edu/learningcommons
Learning Commons Floor Plan: http://www.umass.edu/learningcommons/floorplan.html
Academic Advising Link: http://www.umass.edu/advising/new_AAL.htm
Career Services: http://www.umass.edu/careers/
Learning Resource Center: http://www.umass.edu/lrc/
OIT Help Desk: http://hds05.oit.umass.edu/help.html

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