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Preserving the Vitality of Learning Commons Spaces Through Dynamic Programming: The Learning Commons After Dark Series

by Jennifer Calvo (Former Reference Librarian for the Learning Commons, North Carolina State University Libraries) <jenni4calvo@gmail.com>

Libraries face an interesting challenge when planning and maintaining new learning spaces. Most are heavily used spaces designed to facilitate collaborative learning and social engagement. Attracting students to the space is not as much of a challenge as finding ways to meet the vision of the space, and keep the space both vibrant and relevant to the users. Three key components to keeping learning spaces vibrant will be discussed, as well as programming ideas from the Learning Commons After Dark Series.

The History and Culture of the Commons

In 2007, the NCSU Libraries opened D. H. Hill Library’s Learning Commons, a space designed to meet the rapidly changing needs of today’s students. It is not only a student-centered, but a student defined space with mobile furniture, soft-seating areas, and collaborative workspaces. The flexible design of the Learning Commons facilitates change by offering students a place that provokes their imagination. I believe the design of the space is effective because it provides a welcoming environment for students to congregate, collaborate, and create.

The Learning Commons was immediately a hit with students. Even after two years the number of students in the space can top 300 at eleven o’clock at night. Students tend to linger in the space because it accommodates both their social and academic needs. I like to think of this type of use of academic library space as a new addition to a college student’s lifestyle — a “Learning Commons Lifestyle.”

continued on page 40

Against the Grain / September 2009
All in one day a student may participate in a study group session to prepare for a biology exam, take a break and order pizza to be delivered to the library, play video or board games with a group of friends, then seek assistance from a librarian in locating resources for a paper they plan to write in the Learning Commons at night. I know many students who consistently spend long hours in the library, and feel that the Learning Commons is their second home, a place that provides a sense of comfort and community.

**Build it and They Will Come….**

**Now what?**

In many ways, the design of the Learning Commons has been a tremendous success. As previously mentioned, it is a thriving area of the library that is consistently used for learning, creating, and socializing. Now that the Commons has been open for two years, I believe the library is facing a challenge that many libraries with modern learning spaces will encounter.

Last summer an upperclassman led a campus tour for prospective students and their parents. As he walked the students through the Learning Commons, he told them that it was the largest computer lab on campus — and then left. I suddenly realized how easily a vision and a message can be lost.

One of the greatest challenges libraries with Learning Commons spaces will soon face is how to keep the vibrant and innovative culture of the Commons going once the space is a few years old. How will libraries find new ways to further the vision of the Commons, and prevent it from turning into just another computer lab?

I believe there are three key components to not only maintaining, but broadening the vision of the Learning Commons.

**Innovative Services**

Being responsive to students’ needs is always a high priority. The ability to offer new and innovative services, such as device lending in a Learning Commons space, affords students the opportunity to experiment with new types of devices. These types of services empower students to explore and express themselves in totally new ways. The Learning Commons can already support many technology oriented services because of the access to media editing software available on the computers in the space.

**Actively Engaged Staff**

While the design of a Learning Commons space lends itself to collaborative and creative learning endeavors, it takes an actively engaged staff to make the space come alive. An actively engaged staff is what truly drives the Commons and its vision. They are always looking for new opportunities to assist students not only in locating and citing resources, but also with brainstorming for projects, suggesting works of fiction they may be interested in, and in all ways seeking out opportunities to both teach and develop relationships with students to understand their interests and meet their needs. An actively engaged staff plays such a vital role in building a sense of community in the Learning Commons by getting out from behind the desk and using roaming techniques to interact with students in the space. I know that some are uncomfortable walking through tight computer stations where they feel that the student may see them as policing their activities. Whenever I roam the Commons I think of it as if I am hosting a party. I am not there to tell students what to do, rather, when I am roaming, I am checking to make sure that they have what they need, compliment an outfit or two, or ask about a video game someone is playing. I am always amazed how many students will begin to raise their hands and ask for assistance once they see me out from behind the service desk and interacting with them in “their” space.

**Dynamic Programming**

The Learning Commons attracts so many regular users, especially in the evenings, it is a perfect time to offer community building activities, such as weekly board gaming nights and book clubs. Retro board games like Candy Land and Battleship attract a lot of attention as do more traditional library games like chess and Monopoly.

In the spring of 2009 I developed a series called “Learning Commons After Dark.” The goals of the series are to create original programming that highlights the Libraries’ collections and exposes students to the broader university community (much like public library programming), and to foster and further develop the Learning Commons’ student community. The series will collaborate with university units, colleges, and groups, student organizations, and other library departments to develop interesting and dynamic programs.

Due to financial constraints some of the proposed programs for the Learning Commons After Dark Series was unable to be funded, but I would like to discuss some of the events we did hold, and ideas for events we would like to hold.

**Gaming**

NCSU Libraries has hosted numerous video gaming events in the library. There is a Multi-Player Gaming Club on campus that expressed interest in holding events in the library. A Super Smash Brothers event was held on a Saturday afternoon in the Learning Commons. Attendance was so high it was decided that future gaming events would be held in a bigger venue with a large projection screen. The Multi-Player Gaming Club supplies its own soda and pizza. The library just supplies the game boxes and video screens. I try to attend most of the events so that I get to spend time with the gamers and get feedback from what types of games they like, and suggestions for games we should add to our collections. These events also offer a terrific way to meet students that may not necessarily approach a reference desk for help.

**Workshops and Demos**

Throughout the spring semester the library offered a variety of workshops in the Presenta-