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The Role of Collections in a Learning Commons: A Case Study of the Library at UW Tacoma

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Libraries have been wrestling with how to adapt to today's information environment for some time. It's impacted how we think about collections, formats, services, and spaces. Library staff at **UW Tacoma**, established in 1990 as a **University of Washington** campus, have been thinking about what these changes mean to a community that has, throughout its history, prioritized the library collection over services. The institution has consistently invested in collections, both in budgeting for resources and expanding spaces to house the collection. As the community has grown, new faculty and administrators have typically adopted an institutional framework where the library is defined as a space with books. Over the last two years, the library staff has taken on the task of broadening faculty and administrator perceptions to include a modern concept of academic libraries that has evolved to include a diversity of spaces and services.

The **UW Tacoma Library** operates within a complex information services environment largely shaped by the **UW Libraries** "One Library: Three Campuses" model¹ in which each campus is funded locally and develops strengths to support their distinctive mix of programs, students and faculty, while many functions are managed centrally with system-wide acquisitions, assessment, and strategic planning. In addition to this, the **UW Libraries**, and by extension the **UW Tacoma Library**, is a member of the **Orbis Cascade Alliance**, a consortium that continues to push the boundaries of cooperative work with consortially owned content, robust resource sharing practices, and an ILS shared with 38 Pacific Northwest institutions.²

In parallel to this, as a young campus, **UW Tacoma** has continued to grow and change. As the student body increases, the campus develops new services while expanding others. These services are often offered in existing spaces largely based on availability at the time of creation, leading to services located in nearly every campus building, with uneven distribution across campus. With a strategic plan that asks campus to "[i]ncrease student awareness of and satisfaction with the availability and accessibility of **UW Tacoma** resources, support and infrastructure"³ the library has embarked on a process of developing campus interest in meeting this need. By consolidating, streamlining, and simplifying campus academic service points, we can leverage different but complementary forms of expertise. A cross-campus working group, utilizing campus feedback, assessment data, and best practices from the field determined that "[a]n intentionally designed, central, and accessible Learning Commons is necessary to prepare students for emerging modes of information literacy, academic inquiry, and knowledge creation."

Analyzing the library's role and impact on campus in preparation for a new Learning Commons offers an opportunity to articulate valuable lessons learned through a mix of chance, circumstance, and experience. Ideally, those lessons can inform the development of a Learning Commons model that will meet the specific needs of the **UW Tacoma** community.

Case Study 1: A Library in One Building

In a building often described as the core of campus, the original "permanent" library opened in 1997. Described two years later in a local news article as an "undersized library," the space operated with a traditional mix of library collections, staff and student spaces.⁴ As the campus grew from a single interdisciplinary program serving third and fourth year students to a comprehensive institution with six schools and expanding graduate programs, increases to campus library funding continued to focus primarily on collections. Between Fall 2006 and

Fall 2012, the campus registered an almost 60% increase in students: students looking for group study spaces, new technology and expanded services. Yet while staffing and services remained relatively fixed, generous collection allocations provided during the early stages of the shift from print to ebooks resulted in outgrown space and significant time investments in annual weeding and shifting projects.

In order to make a case for space, library staff often turned to the expertise and support provided by the **UW Libraries** long running assessment program. Armed with years of accumulated survey data, a persistent argument was articulated indicating high levels of satisfaction with the library, while acknowledging student calls for more group, presentation, and technology rich study spaces.⁵ In Fall 2012, the campus opened a new building with the first two floors dedicated to library space.

The new Tioga Library Building was designed during a period of fiscal crisis and reduced state funding. With almost every decision shaped by a guiding mantra of value engineering, the final building resulted in beautiful new spaces that met the campus' traditional idea of a library. In effect, the campus designed a continuous experiment that would help us think about the relationship between collections, services, and local definitions of what constitutes a library.

Case Study 2: The New Tioga Library Building

The catalyst for rethinking library space was the creation of the Tioga Library Building (TLB). This building stands apart from the original Snoqualmie (SNO) building and is connected by a bridge. When the campus conceived of and built the TLB, it was designed with traditional library use in mind — a place to house collections. The structure of the building encourages silent use. There is less power and wifi conductivity than one might expect at this point in time, and the building holds almost all of the Tacoma campus physical collections with open stacks split across two floors and an auxiliary, closed stacks. The closed stacks are located in the basement, a short distance from circulation. As such, TLB feels like a very traditional library with stacks, quiet study, and a service point. When faculty ask students to go to the library and browse the collection, students visit TLB. It fits the mental model of going to the library to work for extended periods of time while surrounded by books.

The circulation desk in TLB checks out materials including all physical holds and reserves. If someone wishes to also check out technology, they must visit the other circulation desk in SNO. The TLB circulation desk is centrally located on the corridor that connects to the SNO building. This design enables students to easily find the desk once in TLB. However, this corridor turns a prime "quiet" space into an area with perpetual background noise.

Case Study 3: Snoqualmie as a Co-located Service Point

Once TLB was established, SNO was left to be redefined. SNO is physically separate from TLB, connected by a bridge and an elevator. Once TLB was created, campus signage no longer indicated that SNO was a "library" space, although it still primarily functions as one. Though most of the stacks moved over to TLB, a handful of small, browsing book collections remain in SNO. These collections are placed throughout the building with limited signage and can be confusing to new users who sometimes think those browsing collections represent all of the campus physical collection.

SNO also houses most of the collaborative spaces and technology within the **UW Tacoma Library** footprint. There are several group

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study rooms and open spaces with tables and moveable chairs. All of the library computers are located in SNO, including a number of stations with multiple monitors and spaces for practicing or recording presentations and videoconferencing. The circulation desk in SNO checks out physical materials (from both SNO and TLB collections), the non-browsing media collection, as well as equipment such as laptops, tablets, and calculators. In addition to this, SNO houses the largest reading room on campus in the historic Snoqualmie Powerhouse.

Aside from the circulation of holds and course reserves, most services including reference, consultations, and class instruction are only offered in SNO. In many ways, due to the creation of the TLB building, **UW Tacoma** established an experiment: how would students respond to two buildings split between a collections centric space and a collaborative, service oriented space?

Soon after the opening of the TLB, the campus Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) was physically integrated into the SNO building, absorbing the majority of the second floor. This office reports through another department and has historically had a very different culture and staffing model. It has been clear that reference, circulation, and the TLC could integrate their services more effectively for our students and community, and in recent years we have begun exploring what that might look like in our current configuration while we engage campus in discussions about a new Learning Commons.

Challenges

The unique structure of our library offers both benefits and challenges. In particular, it has been a challenge to assess library space. When it is unclear to students what the library is, they are unable to answer assessment questions about the usefulness of library spaces. Our current campus map identifies only one building with the word library. The other — SNO — is left undefined and open to interpretation by both students and faculty. As an example, when faculty ask students to visit the reference desk in the library, students have a cognitive barrier in determining where that service is located. Is it in the building with library in the name or not?

This is connected to an overarching campus conversation--what exactly is a library? When a campus budgets and allocates resources based on a specific model of a library and they have a physical example of such a library to point to, their mental model is confirmed. As we point to the SNO building as equally a library, we find ourselves needing a new vocabulary and way of explaining what it is that academic libraries offer in the 21st century.

In addition, when a service like the TLC is introduced without intentional design, we have found there are a number of challenges to overcome. For example, it can be surprisingly difficult to share information between units. We have had to find new ways to share meeting minutes and information that meet established standards and expectations of fellow **UW Libraries** tri-campus staff, while also remaining accessible and usable by local, Tacoma TLC staff.

And throughout these conversations we've wrestled with the role of the collections. When isolated by themselves, collections are removed from any context that provides additional meaning. When isolated, the barrier to use is great enough that service points and students have an incentive to avoid using them.

Opportunities and Next Considerations

As a result of these case studies, and working with the TLC and other campus units, we have collectively developed a set of questions we are considering, and likely would be valuable for any institution looking to build an integrated service model.

Role of Physical Collections

Given local context and needs, is there a role for a physical collection? On a primarily commuter campus with a shared collection distributed across multiple campuses and institutions, patrons routinely wait for requested material to be delivered. In that context, is there any reason to orient a library around a physical collection? If space that currently holds stacks is irrelevant in our local context, that space could be reclaimed for collaboration and services. What would be lost or gained from this? What would it mean for a campus that defines the library as a collection of books?

There are pedagogical questions as well. At this point in time, how important is it to learn to navigate a physical collection? What implications are there for student learning if we don't fully understand the role or impact of format on comprehension? What should be the role of collections in a collaborative service environment that supports informal learning? Many of our local conversations center on what collections accentuate the services and what services would benefit from collections in close proximity.

Creating Flexible Space with Multiple or Shared Service Points

How does a campus go about developing or determining if there should be a shared culture with other units? When the TLC was brought into the library, it was clear that the two units were separate. However, both staffs see that students do not benefit from that separation. We also see that, in particular, reference and writing services have a lot in common and could work together to better serve our students. It has become clear that we should work together to build common classroom experiences, service point interactions, and service philosophies. To what end do our separate reporting structures benefit or challenge our students? Can we work in ways that are streamlined for the student even if we retain separate organizational structures? It seems that in bringing together these two units, either structurally or through partnerships, the role of the collection becomes a campus question rather than a library one. To what extent should our partners contribute to the role of the collection in our shared spaces? Finally, how do we create mechanisms for evolving structure and leadership, especially given the deep expertise needed to evaluate questions specific to our field? What works today might not make sense in the future. Though, as the field evolves the meaning of "library" to make sense in our quickly changing information environment, we may be particularly suited to adapt to changing needs and expectations in these collaborative domains as well. 🌱

Endnotes

1. <https://lib.washington.edu/dean/tri-campus>
2. <https://www.orbiscascade.org/about/>
3. <https://www.tacoma.uw.edu/strategic-planning/impact-goal-1-students>
4. Editorial (February 28, 1999). UWT's Expansion is Now on the Line. *News Tribune*.
5. UW Libraries Triennial Survey data. <http://www.lib.washington.edu/assessment/surveys/triennial>

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the **Hay-on-Wye** book festival which includes author's lectures, secondhand book sales, walks to working farms, and medieval artwork. I hope you remember that the energetic **Tom Leonhardt** had the good fortune to experience

the **Hay festival** several years ago and wrote about it for *ATG*. (See *ATG* v.28#3, p.70.)

Starting July 1, the talented **Eleanor Cook** (remember the **Charleston Conference skits**?) is going on what is called "Phased Retirement." This is something the **UNC** system offers to tenured faculty. The librarians are not eligible for tenure anymore but those

who already had it kept it. **Eleanor** will work part-time for up to three years, receive half of her current salary while also receiving a state pension. For the first year she will continue in her position as AD for **Discovery & Technology Services** as recruitment for the position will start and the position will hopefully be filled in

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