Grassroots Report

Next Stop, Information Commons   by Jennifer Burek Pierce

What does late-night bus service have to do with libraries?

When a student government leader touted early-morning ridership statistics for a special student bus route at a recent meeting of the Indiana University Board of Trustees, one trustee asked wryly, "Is the library open until 4 a.m.?" IU President Adam Herbert responded to this perhaps rhetorical question without hesitation: "The Information Commons is open 24 hours a day."

As put into practice on any number of university campuses, the information commons is an institutional effort both to provide integrated services in the 24/7 digital environment and to achieve the sort of visibility that Herbert's easy rejoinder evokes.

The physical Information Commons is new to IU's Bloomington campus, with remodeled facilities dedicated in the fall of 2003. Suzanne Thorin, dean of university libraries, described the newly refurbished first floor of the undergraduate library this way: "We offer round-the-clock access to an open, light-filled space that's filled with 250 computer workstations. . . . The IC also offers books, reference specialists, and technologists all in one place. It's one-stop shopping."

Information Commons Head Carolyn Walters and her staff noticed changes in the facility's use right away. "Our gate counts were up 20% in September over the previous year, and 12% for the semester over the Fall 2002 semester," Walters said. "Students have embraced this concept," Thorin confirmed. "We're already planning an

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expansion on the floor above the Information Commons."

Other campuses

At Colorado State University, the information commons concept is a factor in high door counts. "We have an average of 13,000 students a day coming in and out of the library," said Assistant Dean for Administrative Services George Jaramillo. Especially popular are the 80 laptops that can be borrowed for in-library use. "We can't keep enough laptops, particularly during heavy-use times," Jaramillo said, explaining that the library's wireless network makes it possible for students to work anywhere from ordinary reading chairs to the café.

"Basically, the concept is that a user can come in and get a full array of help. It takes you from the very beginning of the project to the end," said Allison Cowgill, CSU coordinator of reference services. "It's very user-focused. Students expect this, and we're happy to do it."

"It's more than a place; it's a concept—one that has grown tremendously," Emory University Information Commons Coordinator Barbara Mann said of an approach that began with 32 workstations in 1998 and currently involves 168 workstations plus a laptop-loan program.

"Our door count has drastically increased," Mann explained. Although she attributes the upward trend to a number of causes, technology services are a factor. "I can say anecdotally that as the semester progresses, every Information Commons machine is in use from noon on. The students circle like sharks," she said, cautioning that the setup is more than a mere computer lab.

"One of the things that has made this program successful is the connection with reference," Mann added. At one point, reference librarians were getting numerous requests for statistical software, which led them to install a new program on a few machines. When staff saw that those machines were used to capacity, they acquired more licenses. "The type of questions we get helps us decide to add to the resources," she explained.

As the student would design it

"The testimony is that when you provide more of the resources that learners want, they will come," observed Russell Bailey, associate university librarian for information commons at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Bailey explained that a well-conceptualized information commons is essentially "the kind of library a student would design for his or her needs."

The result, he says, is a technology-rich environment that integrates services in response to information needs. This approach has a number of frequently applied descriptors, ranging from "one-stop shopping" to "seamless integration of high tech and high touch."

At UNC Charlotte, the bottom line is this: "A patron can wander up to any desk and ask any question," Bailey said, adding, "at least in theory, no one tells them, 'This is the wrong desk.' The idea is to meet the learner at his or her level." ❖

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