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Reynolds, Sue

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Designing an Academic Library Learning Commons: Students Have Their Say

by Sue Reynolds, University of Toronto Scarborough Library

Background, Aim and Objectives

This is a needs analysis of potential student users as to what should be included in a learning commons, how the space should be designed and what services should be provided. It was submitted as a dissertation for a MScEcon ILS (Information and Library Sciences) at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

The aim of this research study was to gather and document user input during the planning phase of an academic library learning commons, to better align its layout and its services with user needs.

The objectives were to:

- understand user opinions about the existing Informatics Commons at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC)
- learn about user thoughts and needs related to the design and layout of the proposed learning commons
- learn about user thoughts and needs related to the services and functionality of the proposed learning commons.

Methodology

A literature review examined the history of information and learning commons and their implementation in academic libraries, outlined processes used for commons planning, focusing on examples where user needs and preferences were solicited during planning.

Local documents relating to the planning of a learning commons at UTSC were analyzed, and stakeholder interviews conducted with representatives of the Library and Information & Instructional Technology Services to gain an understanding of the local background and to develop focus group questions. The questions were piloted with student library assistants.

Three focus groups were held during February and March 2011 with a total of 15 undergraduate student users of the existing Informatics Commons. The focus group sessions were audiotaped and transcribed, and the transcriptions were analyzed thematically.

Challenges, Limitations

Participant recruitment proved to be the biggest challenge, despite extensive advertizing using posters, emails, web announcements and a personal approach to users. The incentive was increased and then registrations filled quickly.

The findings of this study related to user preferences and needs may be unique to this particular academic institution. User needs may differ from one institution to another, reflecting institution-specific characteristics such as administrative culture, history, academic structure and student composition.

In the existing UTSC Informatics Commons, the students liked

- access to desktop computers, at convenient hours
- up-to-date computers
- proximity of computers to quiet study spaces in library
- comfort of the workstations
- availability of staff for technical assistance.

the students did not like

- overly noisy environment
- lack of separation between social areas and quiet study areas
- slow computers, especially during login/logout
- crowding and overly long wait for computers
- lack of cleanliness of workstations and library
- service shortcomings
- food and drink policy.



Recommended Readings

Bailey, D. Russell, and Barbara Tierney. Transforming Library Service through Information Commons: Case Studies for the Digital Age. Chicago: American Library Association, 2008. Print.

Beagle, Donald R. The Information Commons Handbook. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2006. Print.

Steiner, Heidi M., and Robert P. Holley. "The Past, Present, and Possibilities of Commons in the Academic Library." The Reference Librarian 50.4 (2009): 309-32. Web. 15 Apr. 2010.

In a future learning commons, students need (design and layout)

- less open concept, with separate areas for different uses
- a quiet area for computer use, separated by glass barrier
- more group study rooms, some equipped with a computer
- more computers, more usable computer space
- more study space
- a comfortable social space
- better layout of library entrance to create a feeling of entering a quiet setting
- carpeting for noise reduction
- task lighting and natural light
- more colour and pictures on the walls
- computer furniture with privacy panels and space for the computer and a note book
- more power outlets.

In a future learning commons, students need (services and functionality)

- technological help, e.g. email notification of new software, electronic tutorials, one-on-one help on demand, and classes on how to use software
- research help, in-person and online
- on-demand writing assistance
- more comprehensive training for staff on specific resources and software
- signage for help desks and resources
- a scanner and express printing stations
- means of communication between faculty and students consolidated (intranet, portal & instructor websites)
- a pleasure reading section (novels)
- staff patrols to reduce noise.

For more information contact

Sue Reynolds

University of Toronto Scarborough Library
1265 Military Trail
Toronto, Ontario M1C 1A4
416-208-5169

sreynolds@utsc.utoronto.ca