

Creating a Future: Community College Libraries

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The design of the future is sketched on an invisible canvas.

—Andrew Hughes

Our ability to view a design of the future is based on our knowledge of the historical past and the global present. The dimensions of tomorrow's world are being modeled by today's futurists on a global scale. The future of higher education, of which the community college is an integral part, is linked with the educational demands of an international information-literate society.

Challenges

President Obama told Congress in February 2009 that he wanted America to attain the world's highest proportion of college graduates by 2020. Yet, a 2008 report by the Alliance for Excellent Education asserted that the lack of basic information literacy skills attainment and school graduation rates is an issue. Americans are beginning to recognize that many of the nation's schools are in crisis. Too many students are not learning the basic skills needed to succeed in college or work while they are in high school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008).

Where are underprepared students going to learn the skills needed to be successful and productive citizens of a rapidly emerging global economy? The community college "serves as both springboard and safety net for the inevitable millions who wish to move upward as well as those who missed earlier opportunities and are now ready to try anew" (Gleazer, 1980, p. 131). According to the American Association of Community Colleges, nearly half of all students pursuing postsecondary education attend a community college. A core function of community colleges is to offer college-level course content to a broadly diverse group of students, a population growing in its diversity. Yet, a majority of students who arrive at the community colleges do so with academic skills too weak to successfully engage in college level work. These students enroll in remedial or developmental courses. They receive academic support from the library and tutorial centers.

Historically, the community college has provided a learning resource concept that supported a strong instructional relationship between the library and the classroom. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, when new community colleges were being established at an unprecedented rate, the concept of a comprehensive Learning Resources Center (LRC) became fully developed. The new LRCs were designed to encompass a broad range of instructional services, including the library, audiovisual services, and tutorial services and learning assistance. In the early 1970s, the LRC responsibilities expanded to include computing and telecommunication services. The LRCs have been evolving since as they respond to institutional instructional objectives.

In 1995, Barr and Tagg proposed a shift from an “instructional paradigm” to a “learning paradigm.” This new paradigm of learning greatly influenced discussions among community college leaders. Terry O’Banion (1997) contended that community colleges with their strong penchant for innovation and risk taking were the ideal forum for creating this new learning paradigm. He proposed a provocative new concept called “the learning college,” where learning comes first. Students become passionate about learning. The community college’s *learning library* intentionally and consistently supports student, faculty, and staff learning. Librarians play a forceful, dynamic role in collaboratively designing and developing learning strategies. Librarians teach students to develop and apply critical-thinking skills to their learning. This *student-centered* learning begins in the library, extends into the campus and the world, and prepares students for lifelong learning.

Islands of change are appearing over the landscape of higher education as social trends and forces challenge the institutions. Institutional paradigm shifts affect the libraries in many different ways. These changes include responding to the call for accountability and assessment of student learning, addressing economic pressures to do more with less, competing for scarce funds, turning to outsourcing, implementing rapidly changing technologies and monitoring their impact on student learning styles, responding to changing student demographics, protecting open access to information, protecting individual privacy rights, protecting creators’ rights (copyright and plagiarism), strengthening and supporting library educational programs, and communicating with students and faculty about space design.

However, in many institutions the library has been a passive entity that has accommodated institutional programs. Librarians must become more visible, must become activists. They must partner with the major players at their institutions. To successfully compete for and meet the needs of its customers, library leadership must leverage resources, redirect priorities, take risks, and participate in the knowledge creation process. They must actively engage with faculty. The library is the intellectual commons for the academic community where people and ideas interact in both the real and virtual environments to expand learning and facilitate the creation of new knowledge. Libraries are at the heart of an informational society.

Academic libraries have initiated numerous projects that demonstrate creative and collegial approaches in providing access to information. For example, consortia purchasing and sharing of online databases such as the Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA) (www.vivalib.org), a 71-member organization that includes the 23 community colleges, have provided access to thousands of journals to 88 campuses at an enormous cost savings to all members. SPARC, the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, is helping to shape the future of scholarly communication (www.arl.org/sparc). Scalable instructional efforts built on ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, provide intellectual commons for considering the uses of information technology in all phases of instruction and information literacy programs (Stoffle et al., 2000). Libraries must continue to expand this arena of innovative ideas, especially as they face the dichotomy of institutional financial constraints and expanding user needs.

The needs of library users continue to change at a rapid pace. Libraries struggle to predict the learning styles of the NeXt generation, which has grown up with computers. They are

empowered. They are able to connect to digital sources. They are able to create and publish through the Internet. They are more likely to connect with the library remotely versus the traditional face-to-face visit inside the library. They want 24/7 access to information. More and more of them want to know how to find the answers on their own. They also want spaces for collaborative group work.

Space planning is yet another challenge. Scott Bennett, Yale University Librarian Emeritus and library space planning consultant, acknowledges that colleges and universities want to get a good return on their investments in physical space. In a competitive environment, the campus and its learning spaces will be a principle asset or a chief liability. In the past, the most common rationale for library space was to house burgeoning print and media collections. Historically, library administrators designed space based on operations rather than an assessment of users' wishes. Moving forward, Bennett advocates that leadership examine and understand the behaviors and preferences of students. In surveying college/university students, Bennett found that students want 24/7 access to information, individual study space and group study spaces in convenient, central locations, natural light, comfortable furniture, excellent wireless connectivity, and access to food. Our annual surveys of students at the second largest community college in the country mirror Bennett's findings.

Recently, user preferences have led to creation of spaces known as *information commons* in many colleges and universities. The information (or learning) commons usually embodies a combination of technology-rich independent and collaborative learning spaces along with the full array of traditional library services. Users of the information commons require instructional support, which comes from collaboration between librarians and instructional technologists (Bennett, 2007). Community colleges are already there. For over 30 years, LRCs have blended technology resources, instructional support, and library services. Since the early 1990s, community college libraries have collaborated with campus technology services to expand access to information across the campus and to remote users and have provided technical instruction and support, academic tutorial support, and access to a wide array of research databases through collegial partnerships. The community college will continue to seek new opportunities to serve its users.

The Crystal Ball

What will the library of the future look like? Who has the vision to see into the crystal ball? In 2003, Fairleigh Dickenson University challenged people to do just that. Respondents offered intriguing ideas. A Los Angeles media guru envisioned a visual infrastructure of video-displaying walls, situation room theaters, learning "cafeterias," and dispersed, theme-centered constructions utilizing multimedia "books." A university webmaster envisioned the library as a virtual reality with a "zoom atlas" to whisk the learner to other places, with time travel to jump back into history or forward into the future. One essay predicted that librarians will be out and about, preserving and extending the traditional mission of the library by proactively calling on colleagues and making face-to-face presentations to professors, departments, and classes. The winning essay, titled "Cybrarians in InfoSpace," predicted that "cybrarians" will engage with students both individually and in learning clusters (Marcum, 2003). Community college librarians are already venturing into this new role, engaging with students individually and in

clusters. The mission of the community college is to feel the pulse of its unique time and place and to adapt to the changing needs of its users.

Today's challenges create a dynamic environment in which librarians must perform unique and essential roles in shaping culture and developing citizens with democratic ideals. The knowledge needs of the twenty-first century will demand leadership that can articulate vision clearly and forcefully. Administrators will share dreams and directions that other people will want to follow.

Leadership

To meet this call for powerful leadership, where can librarians go to enhance their leadership skills? Professional organizations and associations provide an array of services and resources, but one outstanding opportunity is the Leadership Institute for Academic Librarians. Offered by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and Harvard University Graduate School of Education, this institute provides professional discourse on effective leadership techniques and *how to make librarians' voices heard*. Noted scholars engage attendees in analytical exercises that promote strategic thinking on teaching and learning, inspire innovative approaches to problem solving, encourage intellectual growth and development, and provide opportunities to expand one's collegial relationships. Graduates leave inspired to make an impact on their institutions.

Community college professionals champion the belief that education is about student achievement. They answer the call to "educate more people, educate them to far higher standards, and do it as effectively and efficiently as possible" (Wingspread Group, 1993). The community college LRC, with its coordinated educational support services, is ideally suited to partner with faculty in effectively and efficiently educating students to higher standards. Community college LRCs are ready to explore new territories, to define ways to enhance learning and student success, to join the national effort to measure learning outcomes, and to continue to adapt to evolving needs of our global society.

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