Blended Libraries: Not-So-Common Spaces in Alberta's Academic Libraries

If you were a student today, what kind of research environment would you dream of? Picture for yourself blended library services offering access to electronic collections, technology, traditional library reference AND technology support – all provided under one roof as a one-stop shop. Welcome to the Information/Knowledge Common(s) of today!

Reference/help desks and facilities like these can already be found in several of Alberta's college and university libraries. What do they have in common? Typically, an IC (or a KC) gathers a number of productivity workstations loaded with useful applications such as word processing, presentation or statistical analysis software, and access to electronic information sources, into one unique study space.

A help desk and knowledgeable library staff are added, taking the best practices of traditional library reference service and complimenting them with staff also trained to answer technology and software support questions. Imagine a place where help is available to answer questions ranging from "How do I print 6 slides to a page?" to "Where can I find information on photosynthesis and algae?" Whether it's scanning images, meeting to discuss group projects, searching through Web of Science, or just checking email – the Commons is the place to be.

And by the way, Commons facilities have one other thing in common (no pun intended): line-ups.

Always busy, these unique spaces attract students who are looking for inviting spaces to do their work and play. The mobile student of today depends on technology for accessing course notes, timetables, and communicating with teachers and peers. Computers serve as umbilical cords to much of their work, and communication tools like email and IM are as essential as the phones in the stairwell. The following are some brief notes from Commons coordinators and managers across the province on their "shops," as featured on the cover of this month's *Letter of the LAA*.

Anne Marie Watson and Alice Swabey
RDC Library Information Common

The Red Deer College Library Information Common (LIC) is a place where students, staff, and faculty can pursue the research process from beginning to end — a high tech atmosphere with a difference.

165 computers, each equipped with the Microsoft Office suite of productivity software, an Internet browser, and Adobe Photoshop Elements, are dedicated to student use. For those with more advanced needs, there are multimedia stations with specialized software and hardware, where a student can edit a video for a class assignment, scan and manipulate images, burn a DVD, or create Web content, all on large format monitors for precision viewing. The LIC also boasts a wireless network for use with the Library's wireless laptops. The laptops are a wildly popular resource in the LIC, in high demand when regular stations are full, by groups needing an extra station in their group study room, and by students preferring to work in a cozy corner. Also heavily used are the docking station study carrels that allow students with their own laptops to access the Internet via the campus network. The reference collection is nearby for convenient access, as is the print journal collection, making for a smooth transition for students moving between paper and electronic formats.

The glue that binds the collection and services together is the Library staff. The Information Desk team consists of reference staff to assist with "traditional" reference questions and research needs, and computer tutors to assist with technology questions and hardware and software needs. The tutors are equipped with a cell phone for quick dispatch to students in need, and a highly visible (and oh, so chic!) red vest featuring the slogan "Computer help @ your library" for easy identification. Weekly training sessions are offered to keep all staff competent in the various software applications.

This marriage of traditional and techno is the foundation upon which our mission is built. As a result, the LIC is the most popular place on campus, viewed as a jewel in the

college crown by the President and our students. Not only is it well supported by students, faculty and community alike, but library staff members take pride in an outstanding facility and resource.

Darlene Warren and Susan Beatty
University of Calgary Libraries' Information Common

The University of Calgary opened its Information Commons in the fall of 1999. The design and implementation was user focused and a vibrant learning community has taken advantage of the well-designed space, technology and the expert help to identify, locate, access and use information resources to complete their scholarly work. Library staff and Information Technologies staff collaborated in the design and planning and continue to collaborate in the delivery of service; expert staff from the Library and Information Technologies provide reference service and IT support from a common service point. Information Literacy and IT Literacy are both supported with instruction being provided on both effective use of information resources and the technologies required to integrate the learning from those resources into a completed academic project.

Immediately after opening, students have claimed the Information Commons as their top choice for research and study. A recent study of the habits of first year students, completed as an undergraduate student project, also identified the Information Commons as among the top four places to hang out on campus. Our goal of providing a comfortable, welcoming learning environment reconciles these two views.

Our students say it best:
> " I think that the Information Commons is a wonderful resource at the U of C. Generally the atmosphere is work and study-oriented, and I am able to accomplish my tasks easily. The staff are very friendly, knowledgeable and helpful. I feel comfortable approaching them with my questions, and I have never had a bad experience with anybody here." Grad student 2004

Geoff Harder
University of Alberta Libraries' Knowledge Common

The U of A's Knowledge Common is poised to kick into high gear with the near doubling of our popular facility in January 2005. Growing from 120+ full productivity workstations to well over 200+, the KC will offer the largest concentrated student computing space on campus. Expanded services such as additional scanners, colour/b&w laser printing stations, multimedia work stations, software licenses for products like SPSS, and a number

of new collaboration and presentation practice rooms (10), will put a smile on the faces of many of our users. New services like laptop lending (a collaborative project with SUN Systems), wireless access points, ad hoc tutorial sessions in newly designed teaching space (a "classroom-on-the-fly!") and online room/equipment bookings only add to the excitement!

But facilities are only facilities, and a group of computers is only a sexy lab without the value-added component of library service. The backbone of the KC continues to be the support offered to students by our crack team of library and SLIS student support persons. Reference associates and other staff from across the system tackle a wide range of questions every day, and provide students with the high-quality service they've come to expect from us. A dedicated team of four library school students do their part to ensure that we can offer extended reference services during the evenings and weekends.

Part of the vision statement for the Knowledge Common reads, "…where the elements of learning, collaboration and discovery come together." The KC is well on its way to offering students just that – an exciting, innovative space for students to explore the libraries' rich information resources and to process and shape these findings into a final product they can call their own. The one-stop library shop. Sounds good, doesn't it?