CLIMBING TO EXCELLENCE

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL LEARNING COMMONS

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Over the years we have asked our readers and colleagues to join us in creative and flexible thinking exercises to help reinvent or re-energize the work that needs to be done in school libraries. Flipping current ideas about libraries and learning helps to create fresh vision from new perspectives. Our work to conceptualize a school library responsive to client needs and global changes erupted from this exercise nearly six years ago. We started not with the space or program but with the users' needs and then tried to figure out what the organization had to do to get the desired results.

Why the name "learning commons"? It became clear that the focus of the transformed traditional school library should be on learning in its many manifestations, whether formal or informal, and the word "commons" should reflect a shift from a top-down organizational structure to the flat networked world in which the clients, both teachers and students, considered themselves to be in command of their information access and learning. Then as we confronted the future, would a physical space in the school known as the learning commons still be needed? Would it be only a virtual space? We opted for both, led by a very different kind of professional.

What is a Learning Commons? A Learning Commons is a common or shared space that is both physical and virtual. It is designed to move students beyond mere research, practice, and group work to a greater level of engagement through exploration, experimentation, and collaboration. A Learning Commons is more than a room or a website. A Learning Commons allows users to create their own environments to improve learning. A Learning Commons is about changing school culture, and

transforming the way teaching and learning occur (Loertscher, Koechlin, and Rosenfeld 2012).

We have proposed that the learning commons serve a unique purpose in the school as a bridge between educational philosophy being practiced and the real world. As such, the learning commons serves school curriculum but is also known as a place for experimenting, playing, making, doing, thinking, collaborating, and growing.

We have been travelling along on this journey from school library and computer lab to a school-wide learning commons for a few years now. During that time many exciting transformations yielded both challenges and rewards. Time to take stock of where we have been and reflect on where we want to go!

The learning commons is always in a beta state on the climb to excellence. Although this journey has no clear destination point or end, the process should have defining characteristics we can use to consider progress and set goals for improvement. How will we identify these special distinctive features that reap the best results? We must examine the kinds of spaces that lend themselves to the participatory learning we seek in the learning commons. We need to review the best learning experiences and backtrack to try to uncover the possible elements that lead to success. We must analyze the qualities and skills of the professionals leading this work. And, finally, we must try to capture the dynamics that seem to drive the best results; what are the characteristics that define a successful learning commons?

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Work Cited:

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