

INFORMATION COMMONS

A PATH TO REDEFINING SERVICES & ROLE OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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In reviewing the events at the University of Iowa in the 1990s that lead to establishing the first ever electronic based information and teaching facility in a library, I identified several themes that I believe still have relevance today in shaping and creating new services.

Themes

1) Willingness to redefine the role or the "business" of the library

In redefining the role of the library, we should be willing to:

- Be Bold & Be Flexible -- don't Think beyond the box – throw the box away,
- Focus on Needs of Users – rather than defining services by what is comfortable for us,
- Encourage leadership and innovation by individuals throughout library.

2) Identify Partners

In order to deliver the services that support teaching, learning and research, and to create enthusiastic support for innovative services of the library, we need to identify and work with partners. This requires that

- Understand what is meant by a partnership, what is expected,
- Identify new partners & new ways to work with existing partners
- Know what we bring to a partnership -- the value of the library and librarian contribution

3) Planning is Essential But so is Implementing

In the planning process it is important to:

- Recognize all of the pieces to the planning process - costs & funding sources, facility design, policies, etc. BUT
- Essential not to get stuck in a planning mode but to be willing to implement even when some questions remain unanswered!

History of the Information Arcade

In 1991 at the University of Iowa, I was asked to meet with a small group of faculty & computer center staff who were trying to think of an innovative project to compete for a large education funding grant (possibly half a million) available at that time from a computer vendor. They were "stuck" as a faculty member said in thinking of something that would be cutting edge. The Library was already perceived on campus as being in the forefront of addressing emerging issues around technology. This was due

in part to a campus symposium sponsored in 1991 by the Libraries on the Future of Scholarly Communication entitled "New Technologies & New Directions". A number of faculty were involved with librarians in the design of the two day conference, and faculty from other universities made presentations related to the use of the emerging technology - at that time, the Internet and Hypermedia - to design curriculum. There were also presentations about scholarly publishing and the trend toward electronic resources. The conference was well attended by librarians, faculty and computer center staff. A number of faculty were excited about the prospects for integrating technology into their teaching, and a small number had already developed computer based materials that they wanted to use in their courses. But there was no classroom on the campus in the early 1990s to permit the use of computer technology for teaching.

It was against this backdrop that I suggested to this small group of faculty and computer staff that we seek funds to develop a teaching/learning center based on technology, and that it be a collaborative effort among librarians, faculty and the technologist. I suggested that this technology based teaching center be located in the Main Library and that the library administration provide the overall administration/oversight of such a facility. This small informal group of faculty, computer center staff and library administrators developed the concept further over several months. This facility would focus initially on teaching and learning because that was what faculty were excited about at that time; the long-range idea was that over time the facility would focus increasingly on research as well.

This idea had no model on which to base the specifics of design or the rationale for why it would work – we were way outside any box certainly for the role and responsibilities of an academic library. It should be noted that at the U of Iowa, the computer center had not shown leadership in teaching faculty and/or students about technology and the various applications. Therefore, the library/librarians were able to step into the vacuum and assume leadership – and indeed were viewed as the individuals on campus who could provide this leadership.

The funding from the computer vendor was cancelled due to a reorganization at that company, and this small group went in search of funding elsewhere for their concept. We sought out the assistance of the VP for Research who was known for being an entrepreneur, presented him with a sketchy power point presentation and said – BOLDLY – how can you help us find funding. He opened the door to an Iowa foundation that was closely guarded at the University by the College of Medicine (to whom they gave most of their funds that were directed to the UI.) We filled in more details around the facility and services, and met with the Foundation Director who happened to be a major believer in the centrality of libraries – he said, “submit the proposal – I’m sure that the Board will fund it.” We received \$700,000 toward construction, hardware/software for the initial grant to build what became known as the Information Arcade – a name that is trademarked.

I will mention later additional grants that we received from this same Foundation as a result of the developments in service that emerged from the Information Arcade.

But first let me describe briefly what this idea became – what the Arcade was as a physical facility and service within the Main Library.

Information Arcade. (Transparencies)

- 6000 square foot electronic information facility opened in September 1992, and
- consists of a classroom with 24 networked workstations and varied projection systems.
- another X workstations exists outside the classroom as well as
- multi-media workstations.
- a service desk.

This classroom is glass enclosed using a new technology at that time to permit the glass to be opaque when it is being used a classroom by the press of a button. When it is not in use as a classroom the glass is clear and anyone can use the workstations and be observed as well.

Staffing. The response by the University Administration to a request for staffing the Information Arcade was initially disappointing but we soon learned that what we saw as a negative was actually a rich source of talent for the Libraries and this new initiative. The University Graduate College

assigned six (6) graduate assistants lines at 20 hours a week for the Information Arcade. This was the equivalent of 3 FTE. We quickly realized that the GAs were a tremendous asset to the venture.

They were hired for not only technical knowledge and skills . . .but for their people skills. The focus of the Arcade always was on people not technology, information and knowledge not workstations. The graduate students were in their early to mid 20s, energetic, curious and open to change.

These positions – advertised all over campus – became much sought after by graduate students and they brought a broad range of academic backgrounds – mostly humanities and social sciences (including business and library science) with an occasional science major. And for many of the graduate students, their responsibilities in the Arcade contributed to their academic work and to their careers.

While creating the Information Arcade was significant in and of itself – it was what followed in services that really redefined & broadened the role of the Library and librarians at the U of Iowa. The development of new services & delivery of services such as user education in new ways is where librarians were truly BOLD & user focused. I will talk more about this in a moment.

When the Information Arcade opened in fall 1992, there were twenty-two academic courses – 22 faculty – signed up to teach all or a portion of a course in the Arcade! And we were still working out all of the kinks & issues around networking, etc. I thought the reaction of the faculty was amazing – enthusiastic, excited and very open to working with librarians and other staff to create a new approach to their courses. I was asked frequently by librarians around the country – how did you do this? How did you get faculty to come, to try, to use the Arcade. But I didn't have to convince any individual faculty to use the facility. Many were involved in the design and development of the Arcade and they convinced their colleagues to develop their teaching materials for the Arcade. The facility never belonged exclusively to librarians or the library. From the very beginning this was "our" facility. So the message was not – we in the library have done something good for you, now come in & check it out.

So – in pushing forward with this idea (& we were PUSHY)- we were Bold and Flexible -- building on the application of emerging technology and putting this squarely in the context of the library and working with our partners – faculty and technology staff – to create a user focused facility and services.

We never said, the Library has some spare real estate and some other campus unit can use this space. In fact, the Arcade classroom is not part of the University classrooms for general scheduling – all scheduling is handled by the Arcade staff. The library administration stepped up and said we will be front and center on this endeavor, we will take administrative

responsibility for day to day operations and budgets as well as mistakes - while sharing the development & success of this new venture for the campus.

There was *no blueprint* for such a service from any other university or library – there were a few campuses in the early 1990s that had classrooms in which computer technology was minimally used (primarily by the instructor - not the students) and there were computer clusters around campuses. But we were proposing a new service – not just a place.

There was a risk inherent in being this BOLD – but we were building this idea with a safety net of sorts – we were doing this through a partnership of faculty, librarians and technologist. Campus administrators and foundations like the idea of partnerships! And I should note that the faculty with whom we worked were highly respected on campus by their colleagues & the administration so by association we had strong support for this radical new and costly venture for the campus. The development of the Information Arcade in conjunction with faculty and computer center staff was not an accident but integral to the design.

Collaboration and Partnerships

The development of the Information Arcade as a partnership was a significant factor in the success of this venture – both in acquiring the funds and in the services that emerged throughout the 1990s.

I want to describe some of the steps that we took to create a true collaborative effort. In developing the facility – we moved from the initial small “think tank” group, to establishing a *Steering Committee* of equal numbers of faculty, librarians and computer center staff. The Steering Committee had twelve members and it operated for the first 3 years of the Arcade being open. The chair of this Steering Committee was the Director for Library Information Technology.

As evidence of the excitement that this concept was generating, we had a number of faculty asking to participate in the design/development. In order to take advantage of their enthusiasm, ideas and support, we established task forces under the direction of the steering committee to deal with the myriad of details –

- facility design – placement of the workstations, arrangements, etc.;
- selection of computer hardware & software for the workstations; and the multimedia software and equipment
- e-collections that would be incorporated (remember this was early 1990s),
- network issues, and finally
- policies including use of the classroom.

Each of the task forces had representatives from the three (3) participating groups.

Advantages of a partnership. There were considerable advantages to working in partnership on the campus:

- delivered what the users really wanted – not just what librarians or even technology staff want or think students & faculty want or need!
- developed a large, vocal support group when the proverbial hits the fan!
- had an active, vocal and broad based group of campus support for receiving ongoing financial support over the years of operation beyond the initial excitement.

Finally – a significant factor in this partnership was that the library and librarians were seen as integral to teaching and research in a new and powerful way.

Challenges of a partnership. True partnerships require a different mind set and skill set to be successful. The disadvantages of a partnership come when a willingness to develop a different approach and skills are absent among the participants.

- *Need to know how to negotiate – what is the "bottom line"*

Recognize the value of what the libraries and librarians have to offer and within that know what is essential to maintain in terms of services – for example – access in a facility to all members of the University community.

- *Need to be willing to compromise within that understanding of the bottom line.*

Librarians should not give away the farm but also should not be bullheaded about an issue that may not be critical – and we need to know the difference!

- *Good partnerships are built around "equals" – so need to negotiate with partners from a mental position of strength.*

Librarians cannot afford to be intimidated by teaching/research faculty, or to be grateful that they are willing to work with us and learn from us. Instead recognize & value what we have to offer. If we perceive ourselves as less than then, it is no surprise, we will be treated that way and become irrelevant to the enterprise and sacrifice an important role for the library and librarians.

- *Exercise patience with developments that everyone might not recognize or may be fearful about*

Librarians should learn to be persuasive and demonstrate the effectiveness or usefulness of an approach or technology application but also learn how to balance patience with "a sense of urgency." The world of information and technology is changing too fast to lose months because we are overly patient – a balance is needed.

While there was strong support from faculty as well as technology staff and University administrators for the Information Arcade there were some *barriers* to establishing this facility in the Main Library. The faculty who were excited and ready to teach in this new facility in the first year were from political science, art history, history, English, German, philosophy, sociology, education, mathematics, medicine and nursing.

Disappointingly, the response from many librarians was cautious and, in some cases, resistant to learning and using the resources in the Arcade. Librarians were uncertain that they wanted or could learn all of the technology, they were uncertain that they could learn enough to teach others. And some librarians were uncertain that they wanted to give up reference desk hours both to learn and use the Arcade resources.

At that time in relation to technology & with such a new service, their concerns were legitimate -- if not at times frustrating because faculty were so ready for their involvement. It was the library administration's responsibility to provide them with the training, knowledge, and skill to be able to learn and then teach others about the technology. It was also the administration responsibility to set new expectations for outreach and teaching – to redefine the role of librarians based on the shifts & trends occurring due to technology.

A development that motivated the librarians to step up to the plate in learning and using the technology was that within a year, it was becoming

clear that the graduate assistants in the Arcade were going to fill that gap with both students and faculty!

Since the library system already had a fully developed user education program by the early 1990s, the challenge for librarians was to bring those sessions into the Arcade and use the available electronic resources as well as the new technologies to teach. Within a couple of years the Libraries and the library staff were at the center of learning and application of technology on the campus.

Before talking about the services that emerged because of the Arcade, let me describe first the other technology based facility that was developed within the library system as a result of the Arcade.

Information Commons

In 1995, a new dean of the College of Medicine arrived on campus and when I met with him I talked about the Information Arcade in the Main Library and how several of his faculty were coming “across the river” to teach there because there was no such classroom in the huge medical complex. I indicated that if he found the money, we had space in the Health Sciences Library to create a similar facility there – to be used by all of the health science colleges. I was being BOLD but I knew that when he checked with his associate deans and the faculty that were teaching in the Arcade, that he would learn that I was not exaggerating. The College also had undergone a recent assessment visit and was criticized for not having

integrated case-based learning into the curriculum along with new electronic format teaching tools. With this information, the Dean returned to me within a couple of months, and provided almost one million over the next several years to create the Information Commons as it is today. We also received another \$300,000 from the same Iowa Foundation, and funds from the University including for staff to support the facility. When the initial Information Commons facility was expanded, I also requested funding from the other three health science deans – and they contributed.

The first facility was approximately 5000 sq. ft –opened in 1996. Within two months of opening the Information Commons, the Dean of Medicine approached me to say that his faculty were fighting over who would get to teach in the space for their allotted amount of time, and if he provided most of the money would we have space to expand to build another classroom. The expanded facility opened in 1999 providing a 12,000 sq. facility. Let me review the specifics of this teaching/learning and production space.

(Transparencies)

The Library developed a contract with the College of Medicine so that the dean knew what he/his faculty could expect for their funding and to ensure that the Information Common resources/facilities were open to all health colleges.

Services that Emerged from the Information Arcade & Commons

I indicated at the beginning that the truly bold aspect of the Arcade and later the Information Commons was not the facility per se – but the services, projects, activities that emerged – and how these redefined & broadened the role of librarians and the library as a whole.

Let me take a few minutes to provide some examples – keeping in mind that these efforts occurred in the early to mid 1990s, while new services and programs continue to be developed.

Information Arcade

- librarians developed electronic instructional tools for the undergraduate to assist them in learning approaches to conduct research – the program was later updated to a web-based program;
- when a Center for Teaching was established in the mid 1990s one of their stated goals was to assist faculty with learning new technology and integrating electronic resources into curriculum. I approached the Center director and indicated that the librarians could provide this teaching for the Center; he was delighted since he had no staff to speak of.

A major program that emerged was a weeklong summer session providing faculty with resources and intensive training for integrating new instructional and delivery technologies into

their teaching. The first few years of this program the librarians designed most of the program and delivered about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the teaching in this workshop offered several times each summer.

- In 1997, a three year grant of over \$300,000 was received from the same Iowa Foundation to develop a model program for educating faculty in information technology resources and tools, - this program was known as TWIST (Teaching With Innovative Style & Technology);
- In 1999, the same Foundation provided a two-year grant to develop an information literacy program for the undergraduate science curriculum based in technology, and the faculty of the sciences (particularly biology, chemistry, mathematical sciences) were involved in the design and submission of this grant.
- In 1993, the Libraries sponsored a campus program on scientific publishing in the sciences for faculty, librarians and administrators to address the many issues associated with this topic. And in 1998, a similar program focusing on the arts, humanities and social sciences was held – in both cases faculty were consulted/involved in the development of the programs and attended in large numbers.

- In 1997, the Libraries established the Scholarly Digital Resources Center to address the digitizing of local unique materials and to initiate with faculty electronic publications of a scholarly nature. The first initiative was to establish a Center for Electronic Resources in African Studies a "virtual" space of scholarly electronic resources in text, multimedia, and interactive format to support students and faculty at the University of Iowa and scholars nationally and internationally.

Following this the Arts & Humanities Digital Resources Center was established supporting several initiatives including -- the International Dada Archives, the International Writing Program, the Iowa Writer's Workshop, the U of Iowa Presidential Lectures.

- The UI Libraries competed successfully for one of the Ameritech/Library of Congress awards as part of the American Memory project to create digital collections of primary resources.
- 1997, the UI Libraries organized/sponsored a Symposium on Building Digital Collections to address the many issues that were emerging around this topic.

Information Commons – highlights

- Hardin Library Meta Directory (Hardin MD), an internationally-regarded web site pointing to the world's finest health information directory sites,
- The Bones of the Skull: A 3-D Learning Tool program was developed by Jim Duncan who leads the Information Commons to help students learn the features and bones of the human skull.
- Web sites developed by the Information Commons staff are many including for the Iowa Consortium for Mental Health, the Center on Aging, the Department of Sociology and the Nursing Informatics program in the College of Nursing.

The Information Arcade and the Information Commons also provide a place in which librarians are teaching students and faculty about subject resources as well as how to use and apply technologies related to teaching, learning and research.

I will close with a few comments regarding the third theme that emerges in looking at the history and development of the Information Arcade and the Commons.

Planning

It is important to plan the Information Commons carefully – including developing a physical format and organization that can be changed & rearranged in the future as the needs and/or technology alters the delivery of services. Remember bold and flexible should apply to the physical design as well.

And it is important to plan carefully in terms of funding both the initial start-up costs and for operations. What will it cost to do both and where will the funds come from – one-time and recurring funds: library, University, contributions from central administration and from academic units or the college as well as private funds or grants. Again think bold & imaginative – build partnerships in meeting financial needs as well as other aspects of the facility. The continuing ongoing replacement costs for equipment and the constant upgrade to software is expensive and, therefore, careful planning around both is essential.

Planning also should address policies such as the use of the facility – what are the priorities, will the facility be for teaching and by whom, will students be allowed to play games in the facility or NOT. How will faculty use the classroom if there is one, who gets preference, will hours per course be limited? What about the use of the facility for small group work, etc.

Today there is an advantage in being able to consider what other libraries have done in developing an Information Commons facility. You are able to consider their design, staffing, policies and the like to consider what is needed and appropriate for the needs of your user community.

Also consider planning celebrations that attract interest and attention to not only the facility and what it offers but to services; over time it will be important to continue to include such activities in your planning. For example, an opening event for the facility, and later programs for faculty and/or librarians – even students – to discuss their experiences in the Commons. Also consider providing orientation sessions for alumni (e.g., potential donors), donors to the Library, Board of Regents and even legislatures, if appropriate. Remember that this should be a learning center – and you want as many people as possible to learn together and from one another.

So planning is essential but . . . when planning do not try to have an answer to every question in detail. It may be difficult to project accurately a three-year or five year plan – who knows what may evolve or develop. In 1991 Hypermedia was the “in” process – there was no Web, there was no Google – so remember the technology and the possibilities will continue to change, alter, morf, - and we (library, librarians) must be willing to do the same.

Through the planning process you try to anticipate as much as possible what needs to be addressed - to avoid major problems through planning.

But it is necessary to acknowledge that some “learning” will occur through mistakes and oversights and the inability to foresee all developments or issues in advance. It can be a little scary not having everything nailed down but – *walk on the wild side* – and go for it!

I am a gardener and new to the Triangle weather and soil so I’m learning a lot in moving to this area. In gardening the accepted wisdom is “*plan but finally PLANT!*” If a gardener waits until she knows everything & conditions are just right, then another season will have passed – and you have empty space, bare ground and no flowers!

So plan but remember strive for completeness, thoroughness not PERFECTION. I will close by paraphrasing from a recent article in a gardening magazine that I think applies to planning and implementing an Information Commons and all the attendant services:

- Be inspired
- Immerse yourself
- Be patient and expect to make mistakes
- Create unique experiences

And – above all – **enjoy and urge others to enjoy.** THANK YOU.

Information Arcade website: <http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/arcade/>

Information Commons website: <http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/commons/>