

## Positioning Collegiate Libraries for the Future

### Creating a Distinctive Learning Commons to Meet Student Population Needs

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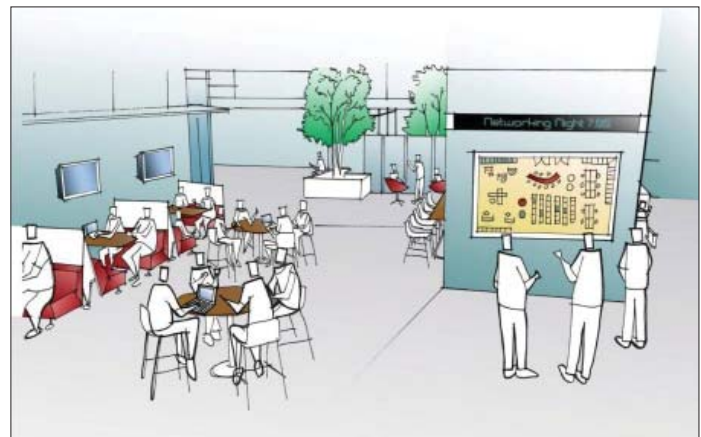
#### Executive Summary

Higher education institutions across the country are looking at ways to modernize their academic libraries while college students adopt the latest technologies. The learning commons model seeks to find a balance between incorporating these technologies and creating functional and exciting spaces customized to today's learners. Implementing elements of this model without a larger vision can create problems in the short term, such as adjacency and noise issues, and can result in inflexible spaces not fit for changing technologies. With a focus on a specific student body's needs, Bond Wolfe Architects partnered with Saint Louis Community College's Florissant Valley campus to identify their unique demographics and develop a vision for their academic library, creating a collaborative and flexible "one stop shop" resource as useful to the students of 2020 as those of today.

To maintain relevance in the future, academic libraries must provide resources not offered elsewhere on campus, namely the availability of flexible and collaborative spaces to support and foster new learning styles.

Academic libraries are the heart of a collegiate campus. Often physically located at the center of campus, they serve as a brick-and-mortar representation of the institution's academic mission. Given the growth of digital resources, many of today's students conduct academic research from their dorm room as much as from the library. In the current environment of constant cost-cutting and budget tightening, university libraries cannot afford to be seen as warehouses for printed materials. To stay relevant, academic libraries must change to meet the needs and lifestyles of today's students. How do academic libraries evolve to best support learning, teaching, technology and research?

While academic libraries have been adapting to the digital revolution, teaching in higher education has been evolving, as well. To prepare students for a competitive job market, more career-oriented classes are offered at colleges and universities, incorporating both group work and collaborative assignments. Passive, lecture style learning is making way for constructivist, active learning: problem solving by doing, with the instructor as a guide. Educators are focusing on personalized curricula and supporting different learning styles. In too many cases, classroom design has not caught up to these changes, so learning is increasingly moving out of the classroom into lounges, corridors and shared group spaces.



*Creating flexible and collaborative spaces fosters learning. (Image courtesy of Steelcase)*

To stay relevant, academic libraries must provide resources not offered elsewhere on campus, namely flexible and collaborative spaces that support and foster new learning styles. In addition, academic libraries are in a unique position to combine technology, information and personal assistance to provide academic support to students that cannot be found elsewhere on campus - a "one stop shop" for student needs.



*Bond Wolfe Architects meets with SLCC-Florissant Valley library staff.*

In response to these demands, Bond Wolfe Architects partnered with St. Louis Community College (SLCC) at Florissant Valley to imagine the college's library in 2020. John Furlong, director of the campus' David L. Underwood Library, noted that many academic libraries were adapting to changes in technology, study styles and collection types by moving to the learning commons model. Together, the library staff and Bond Wolfe Architects' design team researched the college's identity and developed a plan to create a unique, yet flexible, learning commons for the Florissant Valley campus of the future. The resulting report provides a path for college administrators to keep the library relevant to the college's specific community, long-term.

Academic library learning commons are known under several different names: information commons, research commons, academic commons or technology commons, to name a few. Regardless of the label, all share the goal of providing the location, personal assistance and technological support needed for information gathering and collaboration. "In simple terms, information commons bring together content, technology, and services in a physical space in order to support the educational mission of the institution. They are planned with the goal of offering a more integrated service environment for users than traditional libraries have provided." <sup>1</sup>

Learning commons share several programmatic elements or spaces that are found in almost any library facility, including:

- Librarian public space, e.g. the circulation desk, reference desk and reserves
- Staff space with offices, work rooms and storage
- Collections, including printed and digital resources
- Individual, silent study areas
- Public services such as copy centers and lockers

Other spaces and elements incorporated in learning commons are unique to an expanded service model, including:

- IT support and technology assistance
- Media labs, presentation rooms, training rooms and distance learning classrooms
- Academic support services such as tutoring and supplemental instruction
- Career centers
- Group study spaces for collaboration
- Social spaces including cafés or dining facilities, exhibit spaces and student media lounges

Bond Wolfe Architects found that the one key factor in facilitating the collaborative learning commons is flexibility. Providing a variety of spaces with multiple seating options is essential. Both enclosed study rooms and open lounges allow for small group meetings, yet each offers a setting that can be tailored to a group's dynamic or the project at hand. Features like mobile furniture, movable partitions and portable whiteboards facilitate teamwork and interaction among both students and faculty. Flexible work spaces are also more sustainable and cost effective: renovations requiring removing or building walls are replaced with updating furniture, colors and/or finishes. Creating an atmosphere that facilitates research and promotes study is important in a learning commons, so particular attention is given to the availability of natural light, temperature control and acoustics. Power and data outlets, privacy and security and access to restrooms are also important in this environment.

After demographic investigation, Bond Wolfe Architects found that SLCC-Florissant Valley's student population shared many traits with today's 'typical' community college students. With over 7,400 commuters each year, the student body is increasingly older and more diverse. Student growth is primarily with women, minorities, International and first-generation students, many seeking more cost effective and convenient alternatives to four-year institutions. They are digital natives, but are coming to campus less prepared for college, needing to be taught how to evaluate the information they find on the Internet. They choose the two-year community college to prepare for transfer to a traditional college or to get specific career training.

A number of unique institutional goals and focuses gave Bond Wolfe Architects important clues to the school's identity. Major curricular programs include engineering and technology, deaf communications, art, nursing, child development and training for green career pathways. Also, there is an institutional emphasis on community partnerships, workforce development and teaching professional fundamentals as well as technical skills.

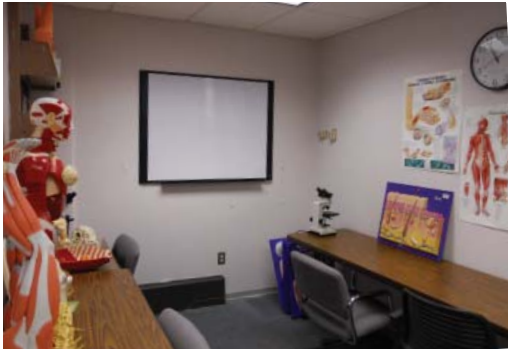
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In work sessions with the library staff, Bond Wolfe Architects noted several trends shared among many academic libraries. The librarians noted an increase in the use of the reserves and inter-library loans as students look for alternatives to buying expensive textbooks. The role of the librarian has shifted as students come into the library looking for assistance with everything from software programs to financial aid. The library is increasingly filling a social role in addition to a scholarly one, as groups look for places to study together. With a shortage of meeting spaces on campus, Florissant Valley library's recently constructed group study rooms had been reserved over 400 times in the first semester.

Taking cues from these interviews, Bond Wolfe Architects developed recommendations for the short-term and long-term implementation of a learning commons to best fulfill the unique needs of SLCC-Florissant Valley's student population. In the short term, emphasis was placed on creating additional group study spaces, including specialized study rooms where, for instance, nursing students could meet and use the models required for their assignments. Reconfiguration of the librarian and staff space to make those areas more efficient also allows additional IT support at the circulation desk, permitting the librarians to focus on their areas of specialty rather than answering technology-related questions. Flexible furniture, such as Steelcase's media:scape, was suggested as a way to create more and varied collaboration spaces and mobile charging stations were recommended as a quick solution to creating a functional student lounge under the existing central staircase. Bond Wolfe Architects suggested enhancements to services such as a streamlined printing process, access to student lockers and restrooms and improvements to signage and wayfinding.



*Students use Steelcase's media:scape to share ideas. (Image courtesy of Steelcase)*



*St. Louis Community College - Florissant Valley's specialized nursing study and group meeting rooms.*

Long term, Bond Wolfe Architects proposed building a library addition that establishes a stronger connection between the library and the campus' nearby student center. A strong overlap of services was noted between the learning commons model and those currently provided by the student center, including academic support and career counseling. For instance, many of the Florissant Valley students that tested into developmental courses went to the student center for tutoring. Rather than locating a satellite tutoring center in the library, a connection to the student center, whether physical or visual, would contribute to creating a true "one stop shop" for student support needs. In addition, the connection would provide a new, more identifiable entry for the library and a more visible and exciting presence on campus.

Finally, moving vertical circulation to the new entry from the current divisive central stairwell would open up space on the library's main floor for additional technology, a popular reading lounge and open, flexible group study spaces. The lower level would feature added social spaces to foster student gatherings, with connections to the student broadcast studios and art gallery.

Designing more flexible and collaborative spaces with student support services will allow academic libraries to evolve with the digital age. The academic library will maintain its purpose as a

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place for research and study and enhance its usefulness as a place to meet, spend time and collaborate with both students and support staff. Understanding the needs of a college's unique student population helps create functional solutions to today's educational requirements. Incorporating meaningful elements of the learning commons model into future library renovations and planning will contribute to creating vibrant spaces for tomorrow's students. The academic library will continue to be the heart of higher education "...when students see a place where they will be able to study, learn, socialize, challenge, and grow."<sup>ii</sup>

### Works Cited

<sup>i</sup> Charles Forrest and Martin Halbert, eds, *A Field Guide to the Information Commons* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009) 18.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas Sens, "Twelve Keys to Library Design: Improving the Academic Experience," *Library Journal* 15 May 2009 <<http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6656754.html>>.

*Bond Wolfe Architects provides architecture, interior design and planning solutions to a wide range of educational and municipal clients. Their projects, practice and people have been recognized for their commitment to enhancing communities, advancing education and promoting sustainability. To learn more, visit [www.bondwolfe.com](http://www.bondwolfe.com).*

*To read more about the Florissant Valley Library Study, visit Bond Wolfe's blog at [www.bondwolfe.wordpress.com](http://www.bondwolfe.wordpress.com).*

