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# Exploring the learning commons

## Tutoring moves into Hinckley Library

In 2010, Northwest College, a community college located in Powell, Wyoming, began a major library renovation. The original project involved increasing the square footage of the library, in addition to a technology-infused classroom, more student study rooms, and a late-night study area. To complement the changes in the physical space, then Academic Affairs Vice President Sher Hruska and Library Director Susan Richards decided to invite two student support services, Peer Tutoring and the Writing Center, to move into the library and consolidate services. Peer tutors would work throughout the library, either at tables or in small study rooms with whiteboards. The tutoring specialist and the Writing Center director would have adjoining office spaces. The remodel created a learning commons that has altered the way in which the library functions and provided additional learning opportunities for students.

Northwest College library and tutoring staff members envisioned the library physical space and virtual space as more than a place for students to locate information. Learning became a more visible and dynamic activity, with faculty and students interacting in new ways. Hinckley Library, Peer Tutoring Services, and the Writing Center all had a heritage of service to enhance student learning. Using Scott Bennett's definition of a learning commons as a place where students practice collaborative learning to turn information into

knowledge, each unit has strengthened its ability to enhance student learning.<sup>1</sup>

### About the library

Northwest College's Hinckley Library, with a staff of four professional librarians, supports the curriculum of a two-year college with both a significant population of students who prepare for transfer to four-year programs and a population of students who study for immediate placement in health sciences, photography, agriculture, welding, etc.<sup>2</sup> Mission diversity presents challenges in developing the collection and providing research instruction to students.

In 2007, the State of Wyoming legislature provided significant funding to the seven Wyoming community colleges to jointly purchase electronic library resources. This money enabled librarians to select and provide research-level resources to students that many comparable community colleges cannot provide. Not only were these resources a boon to the types of assignments faculty can expect students to complete, but they also provided a

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rare opportunity for librarians to fundamentally change the nature of library instruction.

### **About Peer Tutoring**

Northwest College provides free tutoring for any student in any course: math to welding, photography to anatomy and physiology. In order to be a peer tutor, a student must earn an “A” in the course and be recommended by the instructor. Peer Tutoring employs 20 to 30 peer tutors who provide individual, drop-in, and group study opportunities. Carol Zawacki, peer tutoring specialist, oversees the program and provides training. After being hired, tutors must complete an online Moodle course, and they receive additional training throughout the semester. Both tutors and students receiving tutoring must sign a contract.

Peer Tutoring uses TutorTrac to facilitate appointment scheduling and gather data. Before relocating to the learning commons, Peer Tutoring was located in the basement of a residence hall.

### **About the Writing Center**

Before moving into Hinckley Library, the Writing Center employed four tutors and was housed in an empty office in the classroom building occupied by the English Department. The location was fairly isolated, and traffic was limited. That changed when the Writing Center became part of the learning commons.

Any student working on a writing assignment may bring his or her paper to the Writing Center, which employs five faculty tutors and three peer tutors. The faculty tutors have a range of areas of expertise (e.g., ESL, creative writing, technical writing) and provide more advanced feedback for students working on capstone courses or advanced research. Writing Center peer tutors are usually English or English Education majors who wish to develop their teaching skills.

### **Creating the Learning Commons**

Prior to the library renovation, peer tutors and writing assistants often held appointments with students needing their assistance in the library space, so inviting them to make these

activities more formal seemed only logical. The library is a neutral space; students can seek assistance there without feeling that others are wondering about their abilities. It is also a safe space. There is always a staff member available for any sort of assistance whenever the building is open. Both service units were excited about having more space and better hours of operation to enhance their service.

During several meetings, the three groups worked out space issues. The Peer Tutoring specialist and the Writing Center director would each have office space, and the two services would share a small reception and study space. There were concerns. Peer Tutoring staff worried because they were actually losing tutoring-controlled space by moving to Hinckley Library. The Writing Center faculty member would be moving her office space away from English department colleagues. Ultimately, however, both services gained a large amount of space because students could tutor anywhere in the public spaces of the library, and the Writing Center director developed new relationships with student tutors.

Library staff also had a list of concerns about allowing new services to be housed in the building:

- What would the relationship between the library and tutoring entail, specifically in terms of communicating with students?
- What library resources (e.g., photocopier, office supplies) would tutoring have access to?
- How will library staff ensure library resources are used correctly?
- What is the building access policy?
- How do library staff and tutoring staff communicate most effectively?

In the end, none of these issues presented problems in large part because the library staff, the Peer Tutoring specialist, and the Writing Center director signed a contract agreeing on policies to address these issues. All involved believe that the new relationship has been beneficial.

### **Learning Commons successes**

Following the renovation, the library saw increased traffic. From 2011 to 2012, librarians

conducted 157 research instruction sessions for 2,272 students, a 54% increase from instruction conducted from 2008 to 2009, the year before the renovation began. Expanded research resources, a state-of-the-art classroom, and faculty eager to have their students exposed to the learning commons space and resources contributed to this increase.

While pre- and post-test results for library skills document that library instruction is helping students learn how to conduct college-level research, interaction with individual students reveals how this instruction helps them succeed in college. Last spring, a first-year athlete successfully completed ENGL 1010. When he began the class, he was not particularly eager to write the research paper required. By the end of class, he had done college-level research and selected ten high-quality resources on his topic. He wrote a fine paper and even admitted that he enjoyed the reading and writing because he learned so much about capital punishment. The library staff and his teacher noted he had become a regular presence in the library.

After moving to the library, peer tutoring saw a 40% increase in traffic. From 2010 to 2011, 400 students, approximately 20% of the student population, used Peer Tutoring and the Writing Center, for a total of 2,816 visits. Students often “bond” with their tutors. One international student, when interviewed, said his tutor helped him so much with calculus that he got the highest grade in the class on the second test, after failing the first exam. He could hardly wait for his next tutoring session because it was so useful, and he encouraged others to take advantage of the service.

The Writing Center has entered into a highly collaborative relationship with Peer Tutoring. They share work-study students and often tutors. This arrangement allows the students to get more tutoring work and contributes to the sense of community that exists among the tutors. In addition, moving the Writing Center from the English Department had the effect of making the center less an English resource and more a campus resource. The Writing Center has averaged 297

tutoring sessions per semester since the move, a significant increase in traffic.

The Writing Center Director, Professor of English Renee Dechert, relocated from her office with the English Department in the Orendorff Building to the library. Concern about what physical location might mean in terms of relationship dynamics with students and colleagues quickly disappeared. The move enhanced interaction with students enrolled in her courses, who Dechert often encountered in the library with questions that she suspected would go unasked if they had been forced to go to her former office. Second, she became a resource for other students, including peer tutors and their students. Often, they would ask questions about navigating the college. Finally, Dechert noticed that her new office helped her refocus her role as a faculty member. Rather than returning to the faculty after finishing a class, she instead returned to peer tutoring, a place alive with student activity.

Because the new library space was attractive and very functional, the library has had to deny requests by several administrative units to move into the new building. None of these requests fit with the philosophy and direction of the learning commons, so they were relatively easy to refuse. Any future service units added to the library building (there is no additional space at this time) must have a direct and beneficial link to the learning commons concept.

A February 2013 survey of students reported in the student newspaper, *Northwest Trail*, showed that the library/learning commons became the most popular campus location for studying, and library building usage corroborated the result—a 28% increase in building usage since fall 2010.<sup>3</sup>

## Future plans

Participants in the Hinckley Library Learning Commons are pleased with the results thus far but are working to improve the commons. To do this, they plan to pursue the following:

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- **Develop joint learning outcomes and an assessment plan.** Each unit (Hinkley Library, Peer Tutoring, and the Writing Center) has its own set of learning outcomes and assessment tools. Joint outcomes and assessment will present some difficult challenges, but the group is determined to make this happen.

- **Encourage more faculty to hold office hours in the library.** Eight faculty members from across the curriculum have agreed to be available in the library at least one hour per week during the fall semester. They will also complete an evaluation form documenting their experiences. There is no intent to move faculty offices into the library, but to encourage more informal interaction between students and faculty within the learning commons.

- **Train “library tutors” to help students with research projects.** Writing tutors typically receive library research instruction as part of their own classes. Training to help them make the link between tutoring in writing and getting quality resources to improve student papers will be a further step in the evolving learning commons.

- **Develop more structured learning spaces in the library.** The library classroom does not provide enough teaching space to serve the

busy instruction program and allow faculty who want to teach a class session or two in the library. While there is no obvious space to create additional formal teaching spaces, the learning commons participants will attempt to identify a way to provide such space.

The evolving learning commons at Northwest College has been an exciting project, one that will likely never be finished. Librarians, tutoring staff, and the Writing Center director all brought concerns to the new arrangement. Central, however, was a mutual commitment to student learning. Indeed, not only has the Learning Commons proven to be a success from the staff perspective, but hundreds of students at Northwest are benefiting from this new way of envisioning and delivering traditional services.

## Notes

1. Scott Bennett, *Libraries Designed for Learning* (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2003), 38.
2. Northwest College’s FTE enrollment for fall 2011 was 1,984 students; fall 2012 FTE was 1,925 students.
3. Cheyenne Wiley, “Top Places to Study: Quiet Spaces Make for Popular Study Spaces,” *Northwest Trail* 56 (February 14, 2013), 6. 