

Our Learning Commons: Introductory Remarks by

Charlena Seymour, Provost and Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

Welcome to this exciting event, where we introduce you to our vision of a learning commons, right in the very heart of our campus; both physically and virtually! A campus's library is the soul of the academic institution and we want our students to spend quality time there, transforming information into learning, exploring ideas and sharing insights with other students as they **blur the line between studying and socializing!**

This is a new opportunity for our campus as a Learning Commons is not mentioned in our University's strategic plan, but now we have a chance to transform the main floor of our Library into a spectacular new student space.

A team of creative folks from the Library under the leadership of Jay Schaffer, Director of the Libraries, together with a group of like-minded people from the Information Technology Program, OIT, The Center for Teaching, Learning Support Services and several Academic Departments have been meeting to craft a compelling vision for the opportunity we had before us. Given their work, we are now rethinking the campus plan to include this wonderful idea. We have fully embraced the Learning Commons as being the right move, at the right time.

As the Head Librarian at a Virginia school said in a NPR interview "It's time we wake up and smell the coffee."

If you have three minutes, go to this National Public Radio site and listen to the Latte Library at

<http://www.npr.org/rundowns/rundown.php?prgId=2&prgDate=22-Aug-2003>

Libraries are changing, and becoming modern hubs of learning and research activity rather than stuffy places shunned by undergraduates who prefer to study in downtown coffee houses.

You can now get a great cup of coffee at many Learning Commons and we plan to bring downtown, uptown. Think designer, think gourmet, think the unthinkable, food and drink in the library.

But a true Learning Commons is much more than a coffee bar.

Many departments cannot afford to offer such a rich set of services to their students and even if they try there will be obvious duplication. It just makes sense to bring all these student academic support services to our most CENTRAL place, our library; the heart and soul of a campus.

Our Learning Commons will embrace Vice-Chancellor Mike Gargano's "STUDENTS FIRST" motto as we strive to make a welcoming space, with flexible furniture that can be arranged and rearranged to meet the students needs throughout the day and night. There are zones that vary from quiet, individual areas to group work areas where visiting is expected and necessary. We want students to feel as comfortable reading Shakespeare as they are collaborating with fellow students on a joint PowerPoint class presentation.

Our Learning Commons will have abundant computer access, a wireless computing environment, staffed with experts to guide you through the vast library resources to find exactly what you need, when you need it.

Students will make better use of their time with experts from across the campus now located in this CENTRAL location to provide timely, efficient information.

Got a computer problem? see the Computer Help Desk and its team of experts, rather than packing up and going over to OIT.

Writing a paper that seems stuck? See the Writing Program tutors, now located here in the Learning Commons rather than in Bartlett Hall.

Got a question about Organic Chemistry or Statistics? See the student tutors from Learning Support Services or the TA's for your very class or even your Professor who has decided to hold office hours in the Learning Commons.

We seek to remove obstacles to learning, allowing students to make steady progress, rather than becoming frustrated because what they need is **not available here, but over there**.

We visualize that a learning commons will draw students and faculty into a cohesive learning environment where an atmosphere of scholarship and research can be cultivated.

A recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on “What Makes Great Teachers Great?”¹ examined how good teachers conduct class. The seven principles mentioned focused on the nature and process of learning, rather than the performance of the instructor. One of these principles that can be applied to our learning commons vision is ... “that the best professors do in class what they think will best help their students learn outside of class.” These professors, for example, utilize group work that asks students to grapple together and that helps build a sense of community. We believe that concept will be fortified and facilitated in our learning commons making the link between learning in and out of the classroom indistinguishable.

As you can see from the agenda, we have a full morning planned for you:

We will start with Glenn Caffery, from the Department of Resource Economics and the Chair of our Information Technology program.

Glenn will provide a brief overview of our vision for a Learning Commons right here in our W.E.B. Dubois library.

Then we turn to our two nationally known, Keynote Speakers;

First, Joan Lippincott, Associate Executive Director of the Coalition for Networked Information and an authority on modern learning environments will give us an overview of successful efforts at other institutions.

Second, Michael Williams, Associate Professor of Mathematics and Director of the Math Emporium at Virginia Tech, will tell us about his department’s

¹ Ken Bain, “What Makes Great Teachers Great?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 9, 2004, pp. B7-9.

innovative approach to support student learning as they totally redesigned how they teach mathematics to their undergraduates.

During the last hour, the audience will be asked to engage in what we hope will be a lively discussion on what we want our Commons to become at UMass-Amherst.

So Glenn, I turn the program back to you, to lead us through an exciting morning! I trust that we will exit this day, excited, engaged and eager to continue the progress in building our Learning Commons.

Thank you.