

A Review of “A Field Guide to the Information Commons”

Forrest, C. and Halbert, M. (Eds.). (2009). Latham, MD: Scarecrow Press

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Many academic libraries have physical places called “Information Commons” that represent a space where students work with technology and traditional library resources, either individually or in groups. They are able to receive assistance with both electronic resources and resources in other formats from experienced professionals—often librarians and technology specialists sharing the same work areas. Some libraries have renovated existing space to create this learning environment while others have built new additions or entire new buildings with spaces dedicated as Information Commons. Forrest and Halbert focus on 29 libraries that created an Information Commons between 1992 and 2005. Also mentioned are some expansions and renovations to those featured libraries. Dozens more either exist already or are being planned.

The shift from passive learning to active and interactive learning over the past 20 years is highlighted in the introductory historical article by Elizabeth J. Milewicz entitled “Origin and Development of the Information Commons in Academic Libraries.” She says that “[B]y examining the ideas that led to early innovations in library spaces and contemporary trends, this brief history documents a major shift in the type of space that define the library and its role in the academic community” (page 3). This historical overview sets the stage for the rest of this outstanding book. It reminds us all where the paradigm shift began and how it has proceeded to where we are today. Joan K. Lippincott follows with a chapter entitled “Information Commons: Surveying the Landscape,” which brings the reader through the technology transformation and diverse ways of providing service to users by consolidating services in one area for ease and efficiency of use. She talks about a blending of traditional services with evolving new services and formats of information in order to meet the library users where they are, both physically and psychologically.

From those outstanding history and overview articles, the editors take us on a journey of discovery of issues and challenges and successes. Then the field guide part shows the development and history of the case-study libraries featured. This is the place where readers can watch an evolution and revolution of library services for 20th- and early 21st-century library users unfold. The field guide lays out an easy comparison of the way space is used, the services provided, the statistical data about the universities where the libraries are, and includes both

photos and floor plans. Each library description includes what services are provided and by whom. They include information about the blending of print and electronic resources. Many include marketing, publicity, and promotional information specific to the library. And each has a section on funding and budgeting that indicates a diversity of ways in which these Information Commons were funded. There is also an important assessment paragraph for each library entitled “Evaluation,” where the methods for assessing the success of the Information Commons space and services are briefly outlined for each library. From the purpose through the evaluation for each library, the material provided is concise, useful, and easily comparable.

The last sentence of the last chapter is compelling and motivating for all academic libraries and those who administer and work in them. It states “[O]ur notable goal to revitalize academic libraries is just beginning” (p. 181). Between the first sentence and the last, is an outstanding book that is recommended for all academic librarians, technology specialists, and administrators in universities to read and use as a guide from where we started a few short years ago to where we are today. There are points to ponder for the future as user services in academic libraries continue to evolve. The survey instrument that the editors used for the field-guide section of the book is included. There is a timeline showing where each of the libraries served fits in the chronology of the book. An excellent, easy-to-use index is provided at the end.

In addition to the primary audience mentioned above, this book is also recommended for Library and Information Science students who need background about and analysis of user services in some of the major academic libraries in the U.S. and Canada. The information here, while library specific in the field guide, would be a starting place for gathering information from any large research library with an Information Commons.