
The academic literature the first portion of this paper discusses includes scholarly commentaries on the history, planning, development, and implementation of information commons from across the country.

The research study described and analyzed in the second and third portions of this paper is based on six semi-structured interviews with library staff members (four from North Carolina State’s University’s D.H. Hill Library and two from UNC at Chapel Hill’s Davis Library.) Providing a synthesis of the remarks these librarians made while interviewed, this portion of the paper is divided into three critical incidents around which the semi-interviews were structured: the planning of information commons, the implementation of information commons, and an evaluation of the success of the information commons that have been implemented at both the D.H. Hill Library and Davis Library.

Headings:

Learning Commons

Learning Commons—Staff

Learning Commons—Case Studies

Learning Commons—Evaluation

College and University Libraries—Reference Services
FINDING COMMON GROUND: INFORMATION COMMONS AND THE (RADICAL) REVITALIZATION OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

by

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Introduction

During my visit to North Carolina State University’s information commons as part of the library visits assignment for Professor Barbara Moran’s Academic Libraries seminar, I remember being surprised by just how many students were utilizing the library and the physical spaces it provided. The building was literally overflowing with information-seeking patrons. I was so struck by the amount of exciting, positive energy present in the learning commons that day that I knew I wanted to research further the extent to which information commons can help revitalize academic libraries—transforming them into aesthetically appealing physical spaces students and faculty members seek out as places where information discovery is a pleasurable, memorable experience that keeps them coming back time and time again.

As accessing information becomes increasingly easier, I believe that it will be important for academic libraries to remain, if nothing else, places where information access and perusal are an enjoyable experience. In firm agreement with Lippincott (2010), who argues that “the more libraries can promote a close connection between digital content, technology, and academic and professional work, the better they can contribute to the education and job readiness of their students,” I would argue that it is imperative for the academic library of the future to plan, implement, and subsequently maintain an information commons in order to effectively and efficiently meet the needs of both students and faculty in any and all academic contexts (p. 30). Failure to do so is really not an option at this point in history—particularly if we as librarians want to
continue to make our information services both relevant and accessible to the newly emerging millennial generation.

As Lippincott (2010) reminds us, “College students of the millennial generation often do their academic work either with or around their friends or classmates, make ample use of technology and digital content, and focus on their academic work late in the day and early into the morning” (p. 27). As academic librarians living at a pivotal point in a current Technological Revolution on par with the Industrial Revolution, we have the unique opportunity to radically reinvent what the “library as place” means as a concept and how that concept can be re-articulated with information commons and a new millennial generation in mind. Indeed, I would argue that as academic librarians we can use the concept of the information commons to stay relevant when it comes time to justify our funding and—eventually—the necessity of our existence on college campuses nationwide.

Implicit in this argument is my belief that, at some point in the near to not-so-distant future, we can expect the printed texts academic libraries have stored and circulated for centuries to become irrelevant or, at the very least, less efficient than the massive book indexing projects of companies like Google, which I believe will eventually come to dominate the information access landscape. “Colleges and universities today face a complex matrix of change involving demography, technology, economics, pedagogy, and social policy,” Beagle (2002) reminds us (p. 287). With books losing much (if not all) of their relevance, the physical spaces libraries provide to future patrons will have to be re-emphasized in ways we cannot currently imagine unless we choose to think radically.
This paper attempts to do so—first by discussing the challenges we face as academic librarians when it comes time to plan for and implement information commons in our libraries given the constraints of the real world, and second by providing an analytical overview of one-on-one semi-structured interviews I conducted with library staff members at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Davis Library and North Carolina State University’s D.H. Hill Library.

While the first portion of this paper remains theoretical in its approach to the discussion of information commons and the ways in which these spaces can re-invigorate the “library as place” concept, the second portion—which provides an analysis of the semi-structured interviews I did—makes use of interview transcripts to flesh out the “information commons” concept by relying on the perspectives of academic librarians who have planned, implemented, and/or worked in the dynamic learning environments these spaces provide in 21st Century academic libraries.

In agreement with Bennett (2008), I feel that it is imperative for us to begin talking about information commons in more rigorous, theoretical ways. Since the discussion of information commons and their place in academic libraries is already rich and varied, I will only begin to scratch the surface of the topic, but I hope that my initial inquiry into the nature and purpose of information commons stimulates further scholarly discussion and research on the subject (particularly since my research study’s model could easily be repeated on a larger scale by a professor with the grant funding and time to do so).

While we are often encouraged as academic librarians to support our policies and practices with evidence-based research, I believe it equally important that we think
deeply, critically, and imaginatively about the concept of an “information commons” and engage this concept in the abstract, even as we go about implementing it in concrete, real-world contexts such as the D.H. Hill Library on the North Carolina State University campus. This is the primary reason why I opted to do semi-structured interviews for the research component of this paper. I wanted the librarians I interviewed to be able to reflect critically on what they were doing—rather than simply trying to somehow quantitatively measure and/or justify it.
Part I: A Review of the Information Commons Literature and Some Critical Remarks

Inventing the Commons

Since it first appeared in 1992 as 6,000 square feet of space called the “information arcade” at the University of Iowa (Creth, 1994), the “information commons” concept has been a hotly contested one for a variety of reasons that include, but are not limited to: its newness, the rapid change of the technologies information commons utilize, the stress learning these new technologies places on library staff (Hughes, 1998), and the semantic instability that comes with defining any new academic library term such as “information commons.” When they first appeared on the scene in academic libraries, seminal work by scholars like Beagle (1999) and Halbert (1999) attempted to define and outline information commons—discussing everything from furniture placement to new ways of managing staff workflow.

I would argue that, even with the contributions of Halbert and Beagle, which serve as the historical foundations for much of today’s scholarship, the current information commons literature faces a historical crisis of defining what these spaces’ future incarnation should “be.” For Birdsall (2010), this ongoing dilemma is part of a larger redefinition of academic librarianship itself:

The learning commons may be considered as a stage in the transformation of the academic library as a whole to a communicative commons whose objective is to insure that all members of the academic community can exercise their right to communicate—that is, to be informed and to inform. However, to advance further on this transformative trajectory, there is a need to construct a conceptual framework that is in accord with the emerging communicative context of the academic library (p. 234).

The fact that the academic library of the past inevitably competes with and is often at
odds with the academic library of the future is seen in the work of scholars like Gayton (2008), who would have us believe that academic libraries, in order to retain the definition of “library,” ought to preserve the communal experience of studying individually within the context of a larger group of studiers.

For Gayton, the information commons, while necessary and even helpful to patrons, is a concept that threatens to redefine the academic library, turning it into a place for active socialization that it was never meant to be. Although I take issue with Gayton’s claims for a variety of reasons, I also think it is important to understand the argument he lays out because it is one shared by much of the “old guard” in academic libraries—staff members who grew up thinking about the future of academic libraries as being synonymous with the academic libraries they grew up studying in as students (and subsequently working in as adults).

Even as we look back to the innovative, change-driven work of Halbert and Beagle, it is important to note that academic librarianship’s rich history (and the “old guard” who remembers it) will continue to have an influential voice. Given the rapid pace of technological change, however, I do not feel it imprudent to attempt to completely re-imagine what the academic library itself “means,” even if this warrants our leaving behind Gayton’s concept of communal study for new academic library contexts in which socialization is the sine qua non rather than quiet, reflective study.

Implicit in my own view is an emphasis on a student-first approach to academic library design implemented by academic libraries at institutions such as Georgia Tech. When students there were asked what they wanted out of their academic library, they had five primary requests. They wanted 1) a comfortable, attractive space 2) refreshments 3)
access to all types of information technology 4) a flexible space and 5) to feel ownership
of the library (Stephens, 2008). Weiner and Weiner (2010) remind us that:

Institutions of higher education are changing their educational approach from a
“teaching” paradigm to a “learning” paradigm. This transformation requires an
emphasis on student learning outcomes; the inclusion of faculty as well as other
campus professionals as partners in student learning; the seamless integration of
technology in learning; and acknowledgement that learning occurs through all
aspects of a student’s college experience. These changes in higher education as
well as rapid advances in technology have prompted modifications to the
structure, functions, and services offered by academic libraries (p. 10).

With this new focus on student-centered learning in mind, it makes sense to base the
design of future information commons—at least partially—on student input. Cowgill,
Beam, and Wess (2001) remind us that, “Students increasingly require a continuum of
service that draws from a variety of computer-based tools that can search, identify,
retrieve, and assemble information” (p. 439). But information commons must also make
the transition from spaces that both fulfill these rote functions while also remaining
socially desirable zones for interaction. As Dean of Library Services at the Franklin D.
Schurz Library at Indiana University South Bend Michele Russo relates in her discussion
of the Schurz Library’s implementation of an information commons, it is important to
make our academic libraries places where students choose to spend their unscheduled
time (Stephens, 2008).

One problem that arises out of only listening to students, however, is that we run
the risk of either alienating faculty or giving faculty reason to believe that the library is
merely a glorified student union. Combating such a stigma means including faculty input
in the planning and implementation of an information commons. That said, the questions
of How much? and To what extent? remain difficult to answer and no doubt vary greatly
depending on the size and scope of any particular academic institution. Including faculty
input in the design of an information commons is obviously easier the smaller the institution in question is, but even so, this seems to be a decidedly vexing question. No literature I have come across mentions a successful way to balance student/faculty input when designing and implementing an information commons.

If it faces any significant dilemmas besides inevitable gaps in research, the literature on information commons is also plagued by what I refer to for the purposes of this paper as a “crisis of definition.” That is, when we discuss “information commons,” what exactly do we mean by that? Bailey and Tierney (2002) attempted to define the term more specifically as an “integrated commons,” attributing to it several iterations in academic library contexts. For them, the commons being developed by academic libraries in the early 2000’s attempted to “provide a seamless continuum of patron service from planning and research through presentation into final product” (p. 285). Even with concrete definitions such as this, however, the diversity of services information commons spaces provide today has allowed the term “information commons” to become more of a catch-all than a specific descriptor in academic library parlance. Scholars such as Bennett (2008) remind us that “[librarians] have exhibited considerable uncertainty” about what to call information commons spaces, and this uncertainty has the potential to dilute what these spaces currently are and might eventually become unless librarians proactively seek to define the nature and purpose of what these spaces mean in their respective libraries.

When faced with the task of re-inventing its academic library in order to make it a more relevant site for academic inquiry by its students and faculty, Providence College decided that it needed to completely revamp the physical space of its academic library,
renaming that space the “Library + commons” as a result (Bailey, 2010). Implicit in this re-naming is, I think, the sort of semantic confusion that lies at the heart of the definitional dilemma associated with pinning down exactly what an information commons “is.” As academic librarians, it is important for us over the course of the next few years to come to (for lack of better phrasing) a more “definitive definition” of what we mean by “information commons” and what we attempt to change and/or add to the academic library discourse by using such a term.

Keeping this need for a more “definitive definition” in mind, it is also important to realize that academic librarians may never reach universal consensus about the term. During a fellow student’s presentation in my Academic Libraries seminar, I was struck by a metaphor that I think holds true in the case of information commons, which is that we are not dealing with a concept similar to the U.S. Post Office. The “information commons” found at each respective academic library will no doubt be a highly specialized and unique physical space designed by and for the students and faculty of that particular institution—perhaps even to the point of rendering a term like “information commons” meaningless within the context of the larger scope of the academic library literature.

The question related to this idea that I would like future scholarship to address, while simple, is I believe crucial: Have we coined the term “information commons” without first deciding specifically what that phrase means? As we continue to re-invent the information commons as a physical space, I think it remains important to keep this question in mind, lest we get lazy and begin using the term “information commons” in such a general way that it ceases to have any real semantic weight.
Evaluating the Commons as It “Is,” Even Without a Standard “Definition”

While scholars like Wolfe, Naylor, and Drueke contend (2010) that frontline reference librarians can affect positive change in information commons spaces, it is important to note that each academic library has to this point in the history of information commons developed a space tailored to its own individuated needs—which makes establishing what these positive changes should categorically “be” a difficult proposition. One of the reasons I decided to develop a qualitative study to learn more about the planning, implementation, and evaluation of information commons was this frustrating (but also critically enticing) diversity.

Even with the many differences that exist between information commons at sister institutions, there is in the information commons literature a great deal upon which scholars and librarians seem to agree. Lin, Chen, and Chang (2010) point out that, “Flexibility is considered an imperative [of information commons] design” and that “successful designs have been developed by a collaborative process” (p. 339). These tenets would seem to hold true, no matter the institution in question. Predictably, they were echoed by librarians I interviewed at North Carolina State’s D.H. Hill Library, where the planning process for the information commons remains ongoing and includes the feedback of students, administrators, and staff.

Efforts have also been made to analyze the Web presence of the information commons at academic libraries in an attempt to improve their digital presence on college campuses. Leeder (2009), who looked at 72 academic library information commons Web sites, found the content they presented to be widely varying and for the most part
standard-less. In an attempt to improve upon this inconsistency, he provided a framework to which future information commons Web developers might adhere in “Surveying the Commons: Current Implementation of Information Commons Web sites.” Interestingly, Leeder also contends that current discussions of today’s information commons tend to focus on their physical rather than virtual attributes, making a convincing argument that there ought to perhaps be more critical attention apportioned to the importance of their Web presence.

Whereas gaps such as the one Leeder emphasizes in the information commons literature are problematic, there is definitely no shortage of scholarship linking learning to information commons spaces. In an era in which new pedagogical trends have led to an emphasis on social learning, Sullivan (2010) emphasizes that the future of information commons will inevitably be linked—both in terms of staffing and measurable learning outcomes—with students. One of the D.H. Hill librarians I interviewed for the research portion of this paper was particularly interested in this topic, and the dearth of scholarship makes it easy to see why. With a focus on librarians as teachers, scholars like Knodt (2009), Diggs (2009), and Koechlin, Zwaan, and Loertscher (2008)—whose work with young children has an obvious extension to the learning of undergraduate students in academic libraries—emphasize that information commons spaces can become zones for inquiry as well as help spearhead new forms of pedagogy and learning. Building off of these concepts, Sargeant and Nevin (2008) discuss their own experiences as high-school-age library patrons and emphasize that successful information commons spaces, whether at Harvard or a local high school, should make users feel welcome. It makes sense for scholars whose work focuses primarily on information commons at collegiate academic
libraries to pay more attention to literature that addresses the information commons experiences of primary, secondary, and high school age children—since they are, after all, our future patrons.

There are obviously, however, specialized information needs college students and faculty have that require approaches to information services not found in the typical school library. Something many academic libraries have struggled with is how to best organize and staff the reference areas of their respective information commons in order to best meet their patrons’ specialized information needs, moving toward new service models in the process (Accardi, Cordova, & Leeder, 2010). At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, librarians who enacted a quantitative study found that patrons much preferred reference librarians (as opposed to student workers or other library staff) manning the reference desk (Fitzpatrick, Moore, & Lang, 2008) and that face-to-face interaction was highly valued by patrons (Moore & Wells, 2009), even in an increasingly Web-based world. Other academic libraries such as D.H. Hill have, however, found the opposite approach to be more effective. As the second half of my paper discusses at some length, the staff at D.H. Hill were pleasantly surprised to find that their student workers were a significant asset to the commons space and that having them man the reference desk helped make it more approachable to their fellow students.

Re-inventing the Commons

I believe that this is one of the most crucial points in the history of academic librarianship, and that the way in which we as academic librarians handle the information commons in both theory and practice will ultimately come to define the fate of academic
libraries for decades to come. As internationally-focused scholars like Byrne (2005) remind us, “We need urgent and concerted action if we are to promote a truly inclusive and mutually beneficial global information society” based at least in part on the contribution academic libraries can make to future information seeking and use (p. 204).

The Technological Revolution of the 1990’s and 2000’s has placed us at a very crucial information cross-roads with, it would seem, two looming alternatives: we can either choose to ignore technological change and what may very well be a post-book world, or we can react to that change and embrace that world. While the academic library has had to undergo few changes as radical as the information commons—which one could argue is a baseline re-configuration of academic librarianship itself—I think that the commons as a physical space will eventually become the one insoluble characteristic of the academic library of the future. Even after books have been relegated to online indexing and scholarly work dispersed through Open Source initiatives to everyone on the planet with an Internet connection, keeping the most current technology in our information commons will insure that we remain relevant and—perhaps most importantly—justifiably fundable.

So long as we provide useful, cutting-edge technology, we will be able to fulfill what have historically been our primary duties as librarians (e.g., providing access to information, collection-building, reference work, community outreach, and information gate-keeping) within the context of an evolving information-access landscape that is increasingly digital. The only way to remain relevant, I think, is to remain technologically adept and to blend our “old school” skills with new technological ones. As Beagle (1999) reminds us:
Librarians who truly want to engage students actively will not be well served by restricting information services to the old reference desk delivery approach of handing out explicit facts and chunks of information. They will be better served by an integrative, dynamic model that contextualizes information and that creates collaborative workspaces where group processes can shape knowledge in ways that parallel the large-scale evolution of knowledge in the culture around us (p. 89).

The academic librarian of the future will not only know how to build Web pages, navigate increasingly complex data sets, interact with patrons both virtually and in real-life, and understand how to retrieve information successfully from an increasingly larger pool of collective human knowledge—he or she will also be able to think like an architect and computer scientist, designing new information commons spaces and computer-based applications that continually re-make the academic library’s image both as social and technological place. While we may no longer be the guardians of books and the knowledge contained within those books, insuring that we have a vibrant information commons where information exchange is occurring between patrons and librarians is, I would argue, one major reason why we will survive beyond the next several decades.

That said, the good news is that many academic librarians have already embraced a model of academic librarianship that includes the information commons at its heart. Indeed, as Spencer (2006) relates: “The news from the front lines is that the information commons established in college and university libraries are a success. These new spaces are wildly popular with students and are putting libraries back at the center of campus life” (p. 242). If we fail to remain at the center of campus life as Spencer prescribes, I believe that our ultimate fate will be to end up on the periphery of academia—eventually becoming nothing but the dust of the past.

Although it might at first seem radical and unnecessary, I would argue that
insuring that this does not happen will require the academic librarian of the future to not only work closely with IT professionals on campus but to eventually develop the same skill-sets as those IT professionals. If asked where academic librarians will get these skills, my answer is a simple one: the information commons. Leveraging their current institutional clout (though it is in many cases fading) will allow the academic libraries of the present to transition via the information commons into a new age of digital librarianship. The only catch, however, is that if we want to remain relevant, we have to act now. Many academic libraries already have (e.g., Loyola Chicago, Georgia Tech, Indiana at South Bend, and North Carolina State), but just as many have not. Since our survival is a collective survival (i.e., one closed library negatively impacts other libraries in terms of reputation), academic librarians at all academic institutions should band together at present to advocate for the funding and implementation of information commons in order to insure that we remain at the forefront of the technological tidal wave of the next decade and ride that wave into the future rather than getting swallowed by it.

Implementing the Commons

To this point, my paper has focused primarily on the theoretical aspects associated with the idea of the information commons. However, there are also a host of practical, real-world concerns that have to be addressed by any academic library staff attempting to plan and implement an information commons. One that looms large is the potential need for staff reorganization—which, particularly in the context of the large bureaucratic structure of an academic library, could meet with serious resistance from academic
library staff. In the case of Providence College’s library, the “Library + Commons” renaming was accompanied by a reorganization of staff according to the structure and needs of the library’s new information commons (Bailey, 2010). While this transition was successful in Providence College’s case, one can just as easily anticipate a situation where the friction of implementing an information commons might cause a great deal of stress and dysfunction within an academic library work community—particularly if the reorganization required certain staff to make more of a transition than others.

Another issue that has to be addressed is the extent to which the academic library staff will work with campus IT services to implement the information commons and keep it up and running once it opens for patron use. While some academic libraries have elected to keep their technological resources in house by hiring their own IT staff, I think that, particularly in the future, it will make a lot of sense for academic libraries to partner with the IT departments at their respective universities—simply because, as technology and its use continue to become more complex and highly specialized, it makes sense for academic libraries to reach out to IT services and build strong, supportive relationships in order to keep the library’s information commons both up to date in terms of hardware and fully functioning in terms of that hardware’s performance.

Funding, something that academic librarians often cannot control, is also a factor when it comes time to implement an information commons. During a library visit at Meredith College, I thought about this issue and how Meredith had utilized the funding it did have in order to maximize its library’s information commons space. Despite the fact that a very small number of computers were present in Meredith’s library, it is important to remember that, placed in a position similar to the Meredith library staff, we would be
called upon—whether we wanted an information commons or not—to make do with the resources available at any given time.

Time itself is obviously something else to think about when planning and implementing an information commons. Given the fact that many federal grants and university funding for library-related projects operate within a specific time frame, academic librarians trying to implement an information commons may be put on the spot and have to provide a proposed budget in a relatively short amount of time. For this reason, it is important that those in charge of academic libraries keep prospective budgets at the ready in case funding to either build or improve an information commons materializes.

Space is yet another factor we must deal with when planning just where exactly a newly planned information commons will go. Writing early in the history of the information commons literature, Tramdack (1999) advised that “the librarian, the planner, and the architect have an important role in the planning process—to visualize the physical space of the information commons in multiple dimensions. The challenge is to develop working spaces that facilitate integrated information commons activities, including collaborative learning” (p. 93). In addition to dealing with the challenge of developing such collaborative working spaces, academic libraries housed in older buildings—without the luxury of planning a newly built space—must also find innovative ways to re-invent the prospective commons spaces they already have.

The final issue to consider when trying to plan and implement an information commons is one that I refer as the “Paradox of Happiness.” Put simply, this is the idea that, no matter how a prospective information commons space is envisioned, the chances
of this space making everyone happy and meeting everyone’s specific user needs are slim to none. Something that academic librarians might want to consider learning from, however, is the Idea Store model currently growing in popularity in the United Kingdom. Originally designed as a way to save the library as an institution in lower-class London neighborhoods by redesigning it according to specific patron needs, the Idea Store competes directly with for-profit businesses such as local coffee shops by offering many of the amenities typically found in those for-profit business spaces (Wills, 2003). Most important to the Idea Store’s success, however, was its initial design based on patron needs rather than assumptions about what they might want. London residents wanted a space where they could take their children to socialize, as well as socialize themselves—and when that space was conveniently provided, they made use of it in droves.
Part II: Purpose and Methodology of Qualitative Information Commons Study

Purpose

One of the most noticeable means of “spreading the word” about innovations in information commons are blogs related to academic librarianship such as *ALA Tech Source*. Librarians at Georgia Tech University and Indiana University South Bend (IUSB), for example, have been interviewed by *ALA Tech Source* bloggers like Michael Stephens about the planning and implementation of information commons at their libraries (2008). While reading the blog posts of Stephens and others, it became apparent to me that it might be worthwhile to create my own qualitative survey and cull responses from library staff involved with the information commons at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Davis Library and North Carolina State’s D.H. Hill Library, respectively.

I decided to study the information commons at these sister institutions 1) due to their close proximity to me as a researcher, which allowed for face-to-face interviewing 2) their distinctly different approaches to what the term “information commons” means (which provided the study with an evaluative contrast) and 3) the relatively recent planning and implementation of each information commons, which allowed me to track down some of the staff members responsible for creating them at both institutions.

The particular research question my study attempted to answer, *To what extent does the idea of an “information commons” depend upon the intentions library staff have for these physical spaces as they plan and implement them?*, might seem rather basic on the surface. However, it nevertheless remains an essential question that has yet to be definitively answered by academic library scholarship, much of which remains uncertain.
about what the term “information commons” means within the context of academic libraries—let alone what unique characteristics, if any, all information commons ought to share (Bailey, 2010).

My study, therefore, comes at the cusp of what I anticipate will be a host of other studies in the next several years by other academic library researchers about the advent of the information commons and what the legacy initial attempts at planning and implementing these new library spaces means for the future of academic librarianship.

On the whole, I think that academic librarians tend to see the primary purpose of their own research efforts as being the statistical justification of library collections and information services—which consequently results in there being a large amount of quantitative data, for example, about how many students use library computers or congregate in defined “information commons” spaces over the course of a defined time interval (Whitchurch, 2009). While some scholars are excited about such quantitative data gathering—given this method’s penchant for producing clear statistical data—my own interest in whether or not the information commons at North Carolina State and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill were effective at doing what their designers intended them to do is a qualitative question that had yet to be asked in any sort of rigorous, methodological way by other library researchers.

The qualitative, survey-based study I proposed—in which I used survey questions to interview library staff members at Davis and D.H. Hill about the intended outcomes and actual outcomes of their respective information commons—has attempted to 1) learn more about the planning and implementation of information commons in academic libraries and 2) come at a better theoretical understanding of what it means to plan and
implement a library-related project from the perspective of library staff members. It is my hope that the results of this study shed light not only on the planning and implementation of information commons, but on how future qualitative studies like my own with a focus on librarians themselves (rather than patrons) might help academic librarianship begin to create new theoretical paradigms upon which to build and insure the profession’s long-term survival.

**Methodology**

In order to learn more about the planning and implementation of the information commons at two academic libraries, this study included interviews with 6 library staff members at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Davis Library and at North Carolina State’s D. H. Hill Library. These interviews were semi-structured interviews that took their design and concept from the work of Luo and Wildemuth (2009), whose discussion of the critical incident technique of Flanagan (1954) was used to structure the interviews around three critical incidents: the planning of the information commons by library staff, the implementation of the information commons by library staff, and evaluating the information commons after their implementation.

Potential study participants were initially contacted via email (see Appendix 1). If potential participants agreed to participate, a time and comfortable meeting space for the interview was then agreed upon. Lasting 25-30 minutes, each interview was digitally recorded on two Apple iPhones (to insure no technical problems occurred) and was then painstakingly transcribed (see Appendix 4).
After transcription was complete, the interview scripts were examined and analyzed for trends. It is my hope that the synthesis and analysis I have provided generate points of emphasis for future research by other scholars interested in examining information commons with a ground-up approach that examines the responses of the library staff members who actually implement these spaces of collaborative learning.

Brief Description of the Information Commons Spaces at Both Libraries

With different philosophies of librarianship and different user populations to serve, North Carolina State’s D.H. Hill Library and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Davis Library have markedly different information commons spaces—both in terms of their physical orientations and the respective energy and noise levels they typically exude.

The Davis Library emphasizes, even in its commons spaces, the importance of quiet study and single-student learning. This is reflected in the sectioning of the library’s information commons into three distinct areas—two of which contain primarily single-seated desks placed either back-to-back or in triangular orientations with PCs at each desk for student use. The third portion of the commons area, however, includes long study tables where groups of students can gather, as well as couches and chairs that emphasize comfortable studying, lounging, and the potential for social interaction.

While the noise level in Davis tends to be low to non-existent, it is possible—particularly in the space that emphasizes couches and comfortable furniture—that new forms of socializing will occur in the Davis commons in the future. It is important to point out that much of the Davis commons space is part of a recent refurbishment and so
is still in the process of being configured (and re-configured) by staff.

In an attempt to provide its students with a learning climate that splits the difference between their social and academic worlds, D.H. Hill’s information commons is divided up into microclimates, each of which offers a host of different types of furniture and seating arrangements that tend to be clumped together in what I would describe as “information islands.” These islands, which can be social or academic spaces (depending on who uses them and the time of day) tend to include carrels both for single-student study and group study.

The seemingly random repetition of these information islands was decided upon to help give each part of the commons an energy that might have been diminished had the space been more rigidly organized. Noise levels in the commons are generally high—but intentionally so, as North Carolina State’s approach to information commons emphasizes verbal communication and the dynamic exchange of information between students.

There is also a section of the commons set aside for gaming, where a large television and several gaming systems are set up. This space is planted firmly in the center of the commons and tends to be the loudest and most active portion of it on an everyday basis.
Part III: Summary and Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews with Six Library Staff Members at UNC at Chapel Hill’s Davis Library and NC State’s D.H. Hill Library

Analysis of Trends for Critical Incident One: Planning the Commons

The library staff I interviewed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Davis Library and at North Carolina State University’s D.H. Hill Library had a great deal to say about the planning phase of their respective information commons spaces. In both cases, the commons was planned using a combination of team-, department-, and committee-based processes. One of D.H. Hill’s middle management librarians, in particular, had a lot to say about the commons planning process and its structure:

We had a planning group that was very cross-departmental. It was a good number of middle managers (IT, digital library, me, research and information services, and then a couple of key administrator level positions, and probably a couple other random ones thrown in). It was nice in that it was fertile. We planned by looking at a lot of other institutions. There was a point when we realized this was coming so when people had the chance to travel that was one of the things they took pictures of. . . . Various libraries in TRLN had just completed things they were calling “commons” or they were planning or they were midway. So we had a little symposium—I don't think I can remember the year—probably about ’05. And we got together for breakout sessions and conversations about that and also a lot of pictures of other spaces we'd pulled—both interesting functional kinds of spaces as well as “here's Indiana, here's Chicago, here are certain other institutions.” We did things like that to try to educate ourselves and brainstormed ideas about floor plans (D.H. Hill 1).

A Davis library staff member I spoke with echoed the fact that other sister institutions’ information commons were looked at closely during the commons planning process:

“Around that time . . . what was making a big splash in the library literature among other things was the information arcade at Iowa” (Davis 1).

The organic, at times spur-of-the-moment nature of the planning process was another crucial point highlighted in an interview I had with a D.H. Hill library staff
“From what I understand, there was a lot of kind of last-minute decision-making going on—sort of last minute adapting of the space to the actual needs that were present closer to the opening. So they had a plan but made a lot of changes in the way the space was actually implemented by the end of it” (D.H. Hill 2).

With a bit of a different philosophical approach to librarianship in general and the physical library space in particular, a Davis library staff member I spoke with emphasized—even in the face of the kind of rapid change planning the commons entailed—a desire to maintain the historical role of the traditional academic library:

We’ve always had the very highest-end computing here, but at the same time the library has always, perhaps better than the ITS, done a good job supporting the legacy of a historical library. A library is always cognizant of the fact we might have a great CD-ROM people use that runs on Windows ’95. If it’s only available that way, then we have to get it that way. We still try and negotiate licensing, but some of our things have to be password-protected. We see ourselves adapting to current technologies to help students (Davis 1).

During the interview process, I definitely noticed that academic library history and our alignment and/or departure from that legacy was an issue that all of the interviewees dealt with on an everyday basis in their jobs. While no clear “definitive” answer to this dilemma exists in my opinion, it seems worth highlighting it—since it will no doubt continue to surface as we plan other new and potentially history-altering spaces similar to information commons.

Although I was not able to speak with many Davis staff who planned the library’s information commons space because they were no longer at the institution, several D.H. Hill respondents I spoke with had been staff members long enough to recall the planning of the space and—more than anything else—emphasized what I would term a “radical” approach to the planning of their commons space in the sense that they were not afraid of creating an entirely new space that might fail. They were willing to do so if it meant
improving their understanding of what an information commons “could” or “might” be, and for this they should be commended. While I can certainly see an argument for keeping more traditional academic library spaces, it is only through efforts made by staff members at libraries like D.H. Hill that our profession’s understanding of what works in information commons spaces (and what does not work) can grow.

Analysis of Trends for Critical Incident Two: Implementing the Commons

Speaking with a library staff member at Davis who had been employed there throughout the development of the information commons made salient to me the notion that, even in the face of broad, sweeping changes spaces like information commons bring, change at large academic institutions is always incremental, even when implementing something as seemingly revolutionary as an information commons. From this library staff member’s perspective, reference “is still reference,” even in a post-information commons library (Davis 1).

This viewpoint was echoed by the library staff members I spoke with at D.H. Hill, along with some interesting things they had to say about how the implementation of the information commons space and its novel floor plan that, when implemented, changed forever the social dynamics of this academic library’s physical space:

When I saw the floor plan I was really quite surprised because there were smaller elements that were repeated throughout the commons. As it is, different quadrants of the commons have taken on their own caste slightly [since the implementation of the commons]. Everybody knows it’s a little more quiet in this quadrant, and so on. But that quadrant still has some group study, some soft seating, some chairs, some computers. It created all of these microclimates that you wouldn’t have if you just blocked out things. I think that worked out really well” (D.H. Hill 2).

Librarians at both institutions also pointed out that one of the biggest shifts the
implementation of the information commons brought with it was an increase in the
number of services the library found itself providing:

In some ways, not much has changed since we rolled out [the information
commons] in ’97. We have generic and we have specialized, and we have generic
and we have specialized. So, we are still working with patrons with new
technology. We expect it since in the 2 or 3 years that we’d rolled out one service
that we had to go from 3 or 4 to 50. Part of that had to do with the catalog, which
was Web-based” (Davis 1).

Included with this transition to providing more services was some obvious staff angst
about how their jobs would be changed by the resultant commons space and its host of
new technologies:

I think some staff were intimidated by the idea of going from computers that had
nothing but a browser to computers that have access to hundreds of applications
(including Auto-Cat and other applications). But in fact, that doesn’t turn into a
whole lot of application support. So that was maybe in more the fear category
with some people” (D.H. Hill 1).

Perhaps one of the most intriguing byproducts of the information commons
implementation at D.H. Hill was the excitement the new space ignited in student patrons.
The best story about the information commons implementation process I heard was told
to me by a staff member who described the commons on opening day:

The students flooded in, and they were very excited about it. They were doing
things like showing up in people’s offices. They were poking around saying,
“There’s this new space. What’s going on?” They were opening broom closets.
It was funny. They walked into offices and asked, “Can we study in here?” And
so when they were still in that spirit, I think it was the first day, this kid walked in
and plopped himself down at the reference desk and sat in one of the chairs and
sort of just leaned back, looked at the staff member, and he asked, “So what do
you guys do? What’s this for?” And we said, “Well, we’re here to help you find
information, make citations, help you with the computers, whatever. You can IM
us at 11 p.m. from your dorm room.”

And he said, “Really? That's awesome.”

I think if there had been a sign there that said “REFERENCE DESK” he probably
wouldn't have been as curious. The encounter might never have happened. That
was kind of cool and in the spirit of the whole thing (D.H. Hill 1).

An additional unforeseen outcome at D.H. Hill was the library staff’s ability to create and emphasize new opportunities to train and use student workers in the information commons space:

They’ve got all that context. They are students. Whether it's little things like, “Don’t use that learning management system on that browser,” or stuff that isn't so much a matter of training—they've got that knowledge. They know about the campus. They know about the campus culture. We try to learn about that more and more, but we learn a lot from them—getting their reactions, their ideas. We can do that through advisory boards, but the students we work with in the commons are really great. From the perspective of limited resources, one aspect is how cheap they are—and I agree that yes, they are, but if they weren’t doing something really great, we wouldn’t be hiring them. I think it’s important to emphasize that. If they’re cheap, that’s collateral. I don’t want people thinking that’s the reason, because it’s way more than that” (D.H. Hill 1).

One of the library staff members at D.H. Hill I spoke with worked habitually with students and so had a lot to say about how the experience of working with them—rather than simply serving their needs as patrons—helped her better understand the needs of other student patrons, making her a better librarian in the process:

We have developed an excellent model of using student assistants at the reference desk and the digital media lab. It took a little while to figure out what that dynamic was like, but it’s really fun to work with those students, to have them as colleagues, and to learn from them. I’m working with one of the students who used to work in the learning commons. He just graduated. He’s working on another project with me. Just to pick his brain and to have that easy access to him helps me connect with and better understand the students I don’t work with. So that’s something really positive” (D.H. Hill 4).

Prior to interviewing librarians for this study, I had personally struggled with what the role of the student in new information commons spaces should definitively “be,” so it was re-assuring as a student to hear firsthand from an academic librarian that we too have a role to play in making these spaces relevant, dynamic, and—ultimately—successful.
**Analysis of Trends for Critical Incident Three: Evaluating the Commons and Its Future**

The librarians I interviewed had the most to say during this portion of the semi-structured interviews, in which they had free reign to flesh out in their own terms sketches of their own opinions about information commons. The need for library staff to be ready to constantly adapt and to try new technological and spatial configurations was highlighted by a Davis staff member I spoke with, who emphasized that any library worth its proverbial salt needs to be able to respond to new academic trends (such as electronic books) in a timely way:

No one complained when we took away terminals and gave students room to spread out. I think we’re seeing a movement toward more higher-end computing. We’re also working a lot with mobile technologies. Electronic books is a big issue we’re dealing with. People hear we have them and think they can actually use them. We’re trying to work with the publishers, but this has been challenging. So I think some of it is to try and adapt. We see this adapting to what students are doing and perhaps having some of the same services they have in the [Undergraduate Library] here as well (Davis 1).

In addition to librarians’ need to be able to adapt with increasing speed to technological trends, librarians I spoke with at D.H. Hill relayed to me that noise levels in any active information commons space pose a potentially new problem that academic libraries have historically stamped out rather than encouraged—and yet, noise was in their opinion an essential component of their new commons space. “We certainly knew we weren't going to enforce any kind of noise levels. We knew it was going to be that kind of space,” one of them admitted (D.H. Hill 1). This respondent also emphasized that student users tend to be split in their tolerance of the newly found noise: “The noise is an issue for some students, as well as some staff. Sometimes really loud socializing is going on right at the desk, and you’re struggling to hear what the person next to you is trying to say. So that’s different” (D.H. Hill 1). Another respondent’s take on the commons was
that, “It’s loud” and “very much an undergraduate space. I think there are graduate students and faculty turned off by this” (D.H. Hill 2).

An aspect related to noise many respondents talked about was the inclusion of gaming in D.H. Hill’s commons space. While they admitted that gaming significantly increased noise levels in the space, they were for the most part positive about its inclusion, mentioning several times the energy boost it provides to the library as a dynamic social space with a positive reputation on campus:

One of the interesting things I experience about gaming in the learning commons, since we have gaming there—gaming is generally guys gaming (a very particular group gaming), but I was walking outside in the brickyard overhearing a student talking to her parents about gaming and telling here parents, “That’s our library. It’s really cool. It has a Wii.” That’s interesting because she probably never played Wii in the library, I imagine. But there is that vibe of fun and playfulness that I think is communicated by gaming” (D.H. Hill 2).

While another staff member admitted that, “You’ll see the same people playing games day after day, which has a negative connotation,” the fact that many of the respondents I interviewed were themselves rather young may indicate a push towards the inclusion of gaming in many future information commons spaces (D.H. Hill 3). Two respondents were particularly interested in the debate gaming caused in the library. The first choose to downplay it, emphasizing the positive aspects of gaming in the library over the negative aspects:

I know there have been complaints about gaming, too. There’s sort of conflict. It’s not very—it’s not a real heated battle. There are people who are pro-gaming. There are people who are anti-gaming. And it’s not just the gamers who are pro-gaming, but I think that’s something that’s controversial—has been and will continue to be. I think there’s a reason why the library hasn’t decided to sequester the gaming. We could just put it in a room on the other side of the building, but I think there’s a reason why that hasn’t been done. It gives a certain energy to the space” (D.H. Hill 3).

Another respondent related to me what she had heard from students about their opinions
of the use of gaming in the commons space:

It’s cool to hear—you might have students who love the gaming out there and students who don’t love the gaming. The woman I interviewed yesterday loves the gaming, but she’s not a gamer. She likes that it’s there. Then you’ll have other people that will be like, “I don’t get it. I don’t understand why it’s here.” There are students who gravitate toward that activity out there—if they’re studying they like to be among it. Even if they’re studying alone, they like to be near it. Then there are students who really need more quiet than that. And so, they think it’s way too loud in there. They would prefer it if we had nicer furniture up in the book stacks” (D.H. Hill 4).

While I do not have enough space or time in this paper to discuss at length the role gaming might play in future information commons spaces and a radical transition from the library-as-isolated-academic-place to the library-as-primarily-socially-centered-place, I offer up a challenge to other library science scholarship to address this particular aspect of the information commons debate more closely, as I think it gets at the heart of many of the disagreements librarians have about what an academic library’s commons space should be like in terms of atmosphere.

The comments I found most intriguing (and unforeseen) about the future of information commons spaces came from several respondents from D.H. Hill’s staff who opened my eyes to the importance of interior design and furniture choice in creating a positive, successful information commons space:

One of the ways [our commons] really succeeds is that the physical space—the furniture and the cubicles and the layouts—lends itself to a type of work that inspires. There’s something about the cubicles not being 90 degrees or a computer lab table next to a table that is open and—just the fact that you can pull a chair up to somebody that’s working on a computer—there’s something natural about that that just communicates that very easily. You can take a walk over to our quiet reading room (which is a traditional space), and it becomes more like a library—just by the furnishings, the way that people sit at a traditional table, versus these types of spaces and these types of furniture that really lend themselves to collaboration—and you see artifacts of that all over with the white boards, and it’s that actual studying and work is being done. I think a lot of that has to do with the interior design of the space and the furnishings” (D.H. Hill 2).
Another D.H. Hill respondent explained to me that, prior to his arrival at the library, “There was some contention around the furniture,” and that he found this contention to be unnecessary—ultimately detrimental to the library’s desire to create an inviting physical space students wanted to be in. He explained that:

The furniture is a pretty sound investment when you consider how heavily it’s used. It is high quality, probably has warranties. It’s associated with replaceable parts. I also think it says something to have students—undergraduate students at a state school being able to use executive furniture. I think it’s a statement of values, really. Maybe that’s a stretch, but I don’t think the criticism of the furniture in the space is really valid” (D.H. Hill 3).

This particular respondent went on to provide me with a detailed account of how the design of D.H. Hill’s commons interior design and furniture is at the core of what makes it successful:

I think there’s a real lesson to be learned about design, and not just the practice of designing a space—but the effect of designing a space and of the design of furniture and of the design of things like lighting and accessories that I think is something that was profound to me when I first saw the space and that I continue to take with me. The furniture is really nice. Some of it—like the orange chairs you have seen, there’s a little area called the banquette—those are Ames chairs. They’re a really classic chair design from the 50’s. The brown leather chairs are also Ames chairs—a different model. The green chairs are Herman Miller chairs. They’re kind of icons of furniture design, which I didn’t really know when I first saw the space. But I think having those classic pieces of furniture and the quality and aesthetics that go along with that really make the space have a certain feel that’s different from the sort of cheap, institutional furniture you see in other spaces where it’s just obvious that they did not want to spend the extra money on furniture or they didn’t see it was worth it.

I think there’s a real difference in feel to the space. And that might be disappointing to some people—that really you should spend a lot more money on furniture than you would like to—when really we’d rather you spend the money on our librarian expertise or our reference collection, etc. But I think that when the goal is to create a space which is inviting—which inspires creativity and which makes people want to stay there for long periods of time and makes people feel social and comfortable—I think that those design elements really have a big effect” (D.H. Hill 3).
As I continue my own career in the academic library profession, I anticipate taking with me the sentiment expressed by this particular respondent that something as seemingly basic as furniture choice can have a huge impact on the success of a commons space—and, ultimately, academic librarianship as a whole. If we can successfully transform the spaces where we work into places people outside our profession want to be, our survival (although not guaranteed) is made at least more probable.

In the final portion of each interview, I asked the library staff I interviewed to reflect about the future of information commons and librarianship in general—which produced so many interesting takes that it was difficult to single out which comments to highlight in this analysis. That said, a few responses stand out. One came from a library staff member interested in the lack of educational background in the library profession:

I wonder if there’s something going on with the terminology—“information commons” / “learning commons”—what does “information” mean? What does “learning” mean? One of my colleagues who has a Ph.D. in education is always asking the question, “What’s our definition of learning? What’s the learning that we are ascribing to this space? What’s our theory of learning as it relates to the way the space was designed and the way our services are designed, and I don’t think that we have one. We haven’t thought that out as much as we could have. I think there’s an inclination among the library world to sort of claim to be experts in learning when really we’re experts in information resources, and there’s a difference there. And it’s pretty clear in bibliographic instruction sessions that we’re not experts in learning. At least in my experience. Some people are probably really good at it. We also get teachers who’ve decided to enter the library profession, and they’re much more attuned to that. But I think there’s not really a definition or measurement of actual learning objectives and how we’re meeting them or how we’re helping students to meet them. There’s no measurement in that realm, which I think is something that’s lacking” (D. H. Hill 3).

While this particular respondent was critical of what he saw as a gap in the library profession’s understanding of what “learning” definitively is, another respondent was quick to point out that perhaps the most positive aspect of her time working in the
information commons was the visibility the commons brought to the library profession.

A firm believer that the future of librarianship depends not only on our implementing innovative spaces like information commons, but also on the way we project ourselves to the world outside libraries, I found her comments about how the commons space at D.H. Hill serves as a bridge between librarians and the users they serve to be particularly convincing (not to mention an excellent note on which to close this portion of my paper):

I think we might be shifting toward more students wanting—being interested in becoming librarians, working in libraries. I was talking to another library staff member about this because I had a student contact me who was a freshman who had to do a paper about her career, and she wanted to interview a librarian, so I did an interview with her. There’s a woman here today who’s a college student who wants to be a librarian. A friend of mine who works in digital library initiatives, he wants to do iPad development, and he was interested in what we are doing here. He’s in high school. I think students don’t necessarily know what librarians do, but I think our learning commons is exemplifying libraries as dynamic, cool places. I think it might—I wonder what kind of impact that might have. You can see—we know we do a lot of cool work but I think it’s becoming more obvious to students that libraries are really neat spaces” (D.H. Hill 4).

The opportunities for outreach made possible by situations like those described by this respondent seem to indicate to me that librarianship is very much alive and well—due at least partially to the radical approaches towards academic librarianship taken by institutions like D.H. Hill. As libraries with similarly radical approaches to the reconfiguration of traditional academic library spaces continue to press on with new, unforeseen, innovative information commons spaces, the future for academic libraries (at least in the immediate future) looks bright—particularly if we can convince the college-age generation we are called to serve that academic libraries are not just places to be but “the” place to be on campus.
Conclusion

Although there are a seemingly unlimited number of issues and questions we might ask about information commons, Spencer (2006) highlights what seem to me to be some of the most important questions we can (and should continue to) ask with respect to the implementation of information commons as we move toward the future of academic libraries:

1) Does the current model focus principally on undergraduates? How do we adapt or expand the information commons to best serve graduate students and faculty?
2) Should libraries limit collaboration to other campus units or develop new services with commercial partners? With other libraries?
3) What is the relationship of the information commons to the library Web site? At what points do they connect? Is there a digital information commons?
4) Is the current model weighted too heavily towards technology alone? How do specialized services and non-digital materials, such as special collections and archives, fit into the information commons?
5) Will [new research environments] radically change the nature of reference and information services? What skills and competencies will be required? (p. 245)

Although my paper and research study do not discuss several of these questions in detail, they are all worth asking—both in future information commons related research and future critical analyses of that research. The most important question to consider, given the perceived societal move toward all-things-digital, is probably number 3. The idea of a digital information commons might, after all, turn out to revolutionize libraries in ways we cannot yet begin to imagine. Who is to say? Perhaps in several decades time the “library” as we know it will not in fact be a physical space but will instead be dozens of information professionals working from home. If this turns out to be the case, my argument about the importance of the library as a physical space will prove wrong.

I do think, however, that this notion will hold true at least for the foreseeable future—if only because there will be quite a bit of resistance to any completely virtual
world by at least some academic library patrons. If the academic library does in fact survive what seems to be an inevitable shift from our physical world to a digital, virtual one, it may turn out to be one of the last places on Earth where people go to access information the “old fashioned,” nostalgic way—which at that point may be on the consoles of computers manufactured in the 2000’s.

During the course of completing my study, it became clear to me that the qualitative, open-ended surveys I used to cull information about information commons from library staff were an effective research tool that shed light on aspects of the planning, implementation, and ongoing evaluative processes associated with these new, novel academic library spaces. The primary research question I set out to ask, *To what extent does the idea of an “information commons” depend upon the intentions library staff have for these physical spaces as they plan and implement them?*, turned out to have a suite of complex, nuanced answers—depending on whom I spoke with and what their role in the planning and implementation of the commons in their library was. While such a question can never be fully answered, completing the study that accompanied it has taught me that it is important to continue to ask similarly framed open-ended questions—particularly in a field that emphasizes quantitative data gathering.

At the end of the day, there is a rich undercurrent of qualitative information we risk missing if we do not intentionally attempt to dig for it. This tenet holds true whether we are discussing the development of information commons or any other specialized topic related to the day-to-day work of the academic library field. It is worth, I have learned, excavating whatever we can (whenever we can) from our own subjective experiences as librarians—since these, perhaps even more than the concrete statistics we
gather to justify the services we provide, may ultimately define the trajectory of our profession in the years to come.

While it is impossible to look too far into the distant future in order to anticipate the role that academic libraries will have in providing information access to patrons, I think we can say with at least some confidence that the information commons we build today are moving us closer to the post-book age in a way that—ironically—leaves more than enough room for libraries and librarianship. The books may disappear, but the information-seeking habits of the human psyche will remain. So long as there are curiosity and unanswered questions, I believe that libraries will have a niche to fill within our culture. As academic librarians, it is our job to make sure we look far enough ahead into the future to see the ways in which our own niche has changed and will continue to change—whether we agree with that change on a personal level or not—and then react to it. Monitoring our own subjective experiences as those changes occur, I believe, is important.

While it would be easy and perhaps more comforting to think of the academic library as a static institution aimed at preserving the past, this orientation toward academic libraries will in no way help us prepare for and deal with the concerns we will face in the future. Since our primary job is to serve our patrons’ information needs—which are perhaps changing more rapidly than ever before—we have an obligation to meet those needs through the many innovative technologies and opportunities for social collaboration information commons provide us. To put this a different way: we must not look forward to looking back, but rather look ahead to looking forward. As long as we do so, we have a fighting chance at survival within the rapidly evolving information
landscape. Who knows? If the widespread success of current information commons is any indication of our long-term relevance as an institution, academic libraries might even flourish . . . so long as they are able to anticipate and react in novel ways to change.
North Carolina State’s D.H. Hill Library and UNC at Chapel Hill’s Davis Library refer to their information commons spaces differently—Davis as an “information commons” and D.H. Hill as a “learning commons.” This paper considers these spaces to be essentially equivalent, however, and does not see much use in differentiating between them. It should be noted, however, that the definition of an “information commons” is unstable due in part to such slight semantic differences.

Since four of the six semi-structured interviews I conducted were with library staff members at the D.H. Hill Library, this study reflects for the most part the perspectives of D.H. Hill Library Staff members. One of the two staff members I interviewed at Davis Library was, however, the manager of the Research and Instructional Services Department, and therefore provided me with a great deal of insight into the inner-workings of that library’s information commons space, as well as its history and gradual development.
Works Cited


Appendix 1

IRB Study # __11-0440________ Email Solicitation version date: 1/16/2011

Title of Study: Finding Common Ground: Information Commons and the (Radical?) Revitalization of Academic Libraries

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MASS EMAIL SOLICITATION

To: Prospective Study Participant
Cc: barreauc@email.unc.edu

Subject: SILS research project looking for interviewees

Hello,

My name is Scott Brownlee, and I am a second-year MSLS candidate at UNC-Chapel Hill currently working on a research study for my Master’s paper. The research study, which investigates the implementation of information commons, will be based on qualitative interviews with library staff respondents at UNC-Chapel Hill’s Davis Library and NC State’s D.H. Hill Library. I am contacting you because you are a library staff member at either Davis or D.H. Hill and because you can provide me with valuable input for this qualitative study.

In particular, I am interested in how each library developed an information commons tailored to its own users’ particular needs and what library staff at both libraries learned from the experience of planning and implementing an information commons in their respective libraries.

The interview will take approximately 25-30 minutes of your time, depending on the extent to which you were involved with the implementation of the information commons at your library and the extent of your own feedback.

There is no financial compensation associated with your participation, although the input you provide has a high chance of being made available for future library-staff related research on information commons and the ways in which they have changed and continue to change academic librarianship.
(Appendix 1 Cont.)

If you have your own office, we can schedule a time that is convenient for you and meet there to conduct the interview. If you are not based out of an office, it might be fitting to meet somewhere in the information commons at your library, although any site that is convenient for you would also be fine.

If you are interested in participating in this study or If you have any questions about this study prior to agreeing to being interviewed, feel free to contact me via email at scottbrownlee15@gmail.com or give me a call at 512-944-3393. If you agree to be interviewed, we can set up a date and time to meet at that point.

Thank you in advance for your prospective participation.

Warmly,
Scott Brownlee
MSLS Candidate
School of Information and Library Science
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

*** Choosing or declining to participate in this study will not affect your employment at UNC-Chapel Hill or NC State. You will not be offered nor receive any special consideration if you take part in this research; it is purely voluntary. Your answers during the interview will remain completely anonymous at all times. This study has been approved by the UNC Behavioral IRB (IRB Study No. __11-0440_____) ***

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Appendix 2

University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Adult Participants
Social Behavioral Form

________________________________________________________________________

IRB Study #______11-0440_______
Consent Form Version Date: ______3/11/11________

Title of Study: Finding Common Ground: Information Commons and the (Radical?)
Revitalization of Academic Libraries

Principal Investigator: J. Scott Brownlee
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Funding Source and/or Sponsor: N/A

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________________________________________________________________________

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary.
You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any
reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help
people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research
study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this
information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.
You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named
above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at
any time.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research study is to learn more about the planning and
implementation of information commons in academic libraries from the perspective of
library staff members.
You are being asked to be in the study because you are a library staff member at either the Davis or D.H. Hill Library who can provide valuable insight about the information commons planning and implementation process.

**Are there any reasons you should not be in this study?**

You should not be in this study if you feel uncomfortable about sharing your personal thoughts, feelings, and/or recollections about the planning and implementation of the information commons at your respective library.

**How many people will take part in this study?**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of approximately ten people in this research study (five from the Davis Library and five from the D.H. Hill Library).

**How long will your part in this study last?**

Your participation will last 25-30 minutes. When your interview is complete, your participation will be over—although you may certainly request to see the final Master’s paper resulting from the culmination of this study’s research.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you take part in this study, the feedback that you provide during a 25-30 minute interview will be used to generate synthetic and concluding remarks from the study’s principal investigator in a Master’s paper. Prior to being interviewed, you will be given an identifying number along with an institutional tag (e.g., Davis 1, D.H. Hill 2, etc.). At no point will your full name be mentioned in conjunction with any of your responses. For the purposes of transcription, your interview will be digitally recorded. After being transcribed to text, however, these recordings will be destroyed to protect your privacy as a respondent.

**What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. You may not benefit personally from being in this research study.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**

Although there are no physical risks associated with participating in this study, potential risk comes in the form of your comments being read and judged in a negative light by your library staff colleagues. If at any time you wish to not answer a particular question during the interview process for fear of saying something potentially controversial, please let the researcher know and that question will be skipped—no explanation necessary.
How will your privacy be protected?

Prior to being interviewed, you will be given an identifying number along with an institutional tag (e.g., Davis 1, D.H. Hill 2, etc.). At no point will your full name be mentioned in conjunction with any of your responses. For the purposes of transcription, your interview will be digitally recorded. After being transcribed to text, however, these recordings will be destroyed to protect your privacy as a respondent.

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Chapel Hill will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies for purposes such as quality control or safety.

As previously mentioned in this consent form, the digital recordings gathered in this study will be used to generate text-based transcriptions of each interview. Each digital recording will be destroyed upon the completion of this research study (07/19/2011 at the latest).

Check the line that best matches your choice:

_____ OK to record me during the study
_____ Not OK to record me during the study

What if you want to stop before your part in the study is complete?

You can withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

Will you receive anything for being in this study?

You will not receive anything for taking part in this study.

Will it cost you anything to be in this study?

There will be no costs for being in the study

What if you are a UNC student?

You may choose not to be in the study or to stop being in the study before it is over at any time. This will not affect your class standing or grades at UNC-Chapel Hill. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research.
**What if you are a UNC employee?**

Taking part in this research is not a part of your University duties, and refusing will not affect your job. You will not be offered or receive any special job-related consideration if you take part in this research.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, complaints, concerns, or if a research-related injury occurs, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.
Title of Study: Finding Common Ground: Information Commons and the (Radical?) Revitalization of Academic Libraries

Principal Investigator: J. Scott Brownlee

Participant’s Agreement:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

_________________________________________________
Signature of Research Participant Acknowledging Agreement
To Take Part in This Study

_________________________________________________
Signature of Research Participant Granting Consent for This Study to Be Recorded

_________________________________________________
Printed Name of Research Participant

_________________________________________________
Signature of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent

_________________________________________________
Printed Name of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent
Appendix 3

Interview Script

Notes for interviewer:

Turn on recorder. State subject number and date and time.

There is no need to ask every question. Allow the conversation to move freely as needed, but try to keep it relevant to sources used. Be sure to remind the respondent that he or she can refuse to answer any question at any time based on his or her personal preference.

Background information about the respondent:

How long have you worked at the library?
In what capacity/capacities?

Critical Incident 1: Planning the Commons

Primary research question for Critical Incident 1: Prior to the implementation of the information commons at the library, what were some of the motivating factors that led to staff deciding to implement an information commons?

Underlying, related questions:

Where you a staff member prior to the implementation of the information commons? If so, were you involved with the planning of the information commons? In what capacity were you involved? Please elaborate.

Did your involvement include any brainstorming about what the information commons “ought to be” or what it “ought to do”? If so, what did you envision the information commons “doing” or “being”?

Did you envision the information commons changing the experience of library patrons? If so, how did you think it would change their experience? Would it change the way patrons learned in the library? If so, how? Would it change the way they collaborated in the library? If so, how?

Did your involvement include any planning of what the physical space of the information commons would be like? Did you design any aspects of it? If so, what aspects did you design?
Did your involvement include assigning staff members to new roles in the new information commons? If so, what did the new staff organizational structure look like? How did you decide what that structure would be?

Was the planned information commons a response to a trend in other academic libraries to add information commons, since other libraries were implementing information commons around the same time?

If you were not involved with the planning of the information commons but worked at the library during that time as a staff member, do you recall any conversations you had with your peers about the planning of the proposed information commons?

If so, what issues did you address in your conversations “around the water cooler”?

What was the general feeling of the library staff about the proposed information commons?

Were you personally excited about the proposed information commons? Hesitant? Can you elaborate a bit on how you felt?

**Critical Incident 2: Implementing the Commons**

**Primary research question for Critical Incident 2:** What challenges, successes, and/or key learning experiences were associated with the implementation of the information commons at the library?

**Underlying, related questions:**

Where you a staff member during the time in which the information commons was first implemented?

If so, what do you remember about the process of changing the physical space in the library where the information commons was placed?

If you were involved with altering this physical space, what did you learn personally during the process of changing it to fit the look and feel of the new information commons?
If you were not involved with the altering of this physical space, what were your own impressions of it while it was being implemented? How did it either align with or depart from your own impressions of what the physical spaces in an academic library should be like?

Did your job change significantly as a result of the implementation of the information commons? If so, how did it change?

What did you learn about yourself during the implementation process? Did you grow as a librarian as a result of helping implement the information commons? Did you, conversely, find the experience frustrating and/or outside the purview of your job responsibilities? Please elaborate if you feel comfortable doing so. If you do not feel comfortable, that is also perfectly fine.

Do you remember any interesting stories related to implementing the information commons you would like to mention?

Do you think the process of implementing the information commons brought the library staff closer together? Conversely, did it create a lot of tension as a result of job reassignment? Keep in mind that if you don’t feel comfortable answering this question, you certainly do not have to.

**Critical Incident 3: Evaluating the Commons**

**Primary research question for Critical Incident 3:** How has the information commons either fulfilled or not fulfilled its intended purpose as a physical space and a learning space?

**Underlying, related questions:**

If you were involved with any brainstorming about what the information commons “ought to be” or what it “ought to do,” how has the implemented information commons that exists today fulfilled the expectations of the learning and collaborative space you envisioned? How has it departed from what you envisioned?

Is the information commons as it exists at your library today what you thought it would “be” when you initially began the planning process? Does the physical space “do” what you envisioned it to “do”? That is, does the information commons you helped implement fulfill the tasks it was intended to fulfill?

Has the information commons, in your opinion, been a success or a failure? If so, how?
If you weren’t involved with the planning of the information commons but work at the library currently, has the information commons, in your opinion, been a success or failure? If so, how?

What positive things have your fellow library staff members said about the information commons?

What negative things have your fellow library staff members said about the information commons?

What positive things have library patrons said about the information commons?

What negative things have library patrons said about the information commons?

Closing Remarks

This study attempts to gain a better understanding of what “information commons” are. More specifically, however, it is concerned with coming to a better understanding of librarians’ perceptions of what “information commons” are, how they are implemented, and to what degree their anticipated purpose(s) align with their actual purpose(s) in real-world academic library environments.

Understanding the reality of implementing information commons from the perspective of library staff members will, it is this study’s hope, help create better spaces for collaborative patron learning in the future—regardless of what we call them in the future.

What do you think an “information commons” is?

What do you think the “information commons” of the future in your own library might be like?

What is the most important thing your interaction with the information commons at your library has taught you about librarianship?

Do you have any other remarks or comments you would like to make?
Appendix 4

Interview Transcripts

Davis 1 Transcript

Interviewer: How long have you worked at the Davis Library?

Davis 1: I think—I have to look at my resume—but I think probably since '93-'94.

Interviewer: And in what capacities?

Davis 1: First as head of Davis reference—then about a year ago we changed our name to Davis Research and Instructional Services.

I: That will introduce us to the first part of the interview—the planning of the commons. Where you a staff member prior to the implementation of the information commons?

Davis 1: When I first came here they had in the works the Electronic Information Service and that was to provide access to CD-ROMs and perhaps some digital text editing, the kinds of things they did at Virginia, and then a task force developed, and then in the middle of that the Internet happened.

We—well, actually—the Web happened because the library had a gopher but it was all of a sudden right in the middle of the planning and we were able to change course. We rolled out machines with access to the Web. The Web site of the EIS (which was part of reference) was for quite a number of years the library’s presence on the Web because we were working with ibiblio, and eventually the library started having its own Web presence.

If you’re talking about big changes, the library started offering access to Web services when the Web starting becoming “the Web.” We kept that area (which was staffed by people from reference) and then in about the fall of ’96 we planned, opening it in the fall of ’97. We had to move the card catalog, so we expanded Web access by adding over 50 PC’s that included online services, email stations, and then some stand-up computers.

We’ve always had a bifurcation—the reference commons and the information commons—and it was much greater divide when we started the information commons, which was basically a whole bunch of machines with the Internet. We moved the electronic information services over to a desk on the reference side and our terminals had generic access on one side and the electronic information service and the information commons on the other. The Electronic Information Services Desk staffed the whole area. We moved it to be in a better position so it could be where people needed help. But we have always had specialized CD-ROMs, specialized Web applications.

Now, most of that we have rolled out on the other side, but the ability to do different
character sets and specialized things—some of which are detailed—this is all in the reports, which I’ll give you.

So the impetus behind going to the information commons was that we saw success of the however many few terminals we had that got to the Web—and so then we realized we needed more Web stations. Around that time, too, what was making a big splash in the library literature among other things was the information arcade at Iowa.

I: Yes, I heard about that.

Davis 1: I can clearly remember when we came up with the name “information commons” because I was walking around talking with the (blank out name) who basically in generic terms was a UL for technical services, and we’re walking around the area before it was rearranged saying, “Okay—we need to move that here, what are we going to call this,” etc. And I think there were a couple of ideas and “information commons” was out there in the ether, and so we picked “information commons.”

But it is not—and so—that area has always been an area which is set up for the students to use the Internet, for the librarians to help them, but I don’t know if we have all the components that other people put in when they call something the “information commons,” so that for example our undergrad library has some of the design lab kind of features. Again, depending upon what’s happening with ITS and their labs on campus, we may be taking over some different kinds of services. But we’ve also on the reference side offered very high-end kinds of services. We have the GIS machines. We have the statistical data services, but also we have a You-install machine. We have CD-roms that were really hard to install and so some of those requested someone to give advanced notice to install the kind of things—we do have what we call a “You-install” terminal which actually I’m not going to be using the right words but (blank out name) who now is head of the Undergraduate Library was in electronic services in Davis and did a lot of the things, but we used to have an array of machines. She’s done virtual machines, so we have one machine where people can do everything.

So I think the big change for us was in ’97 when for a while we’re adding more and more machines—in fact what we’re doing now is taking away machines. Particularly, we’re doing it as a trial—the reference side—because there’s actually a laptop requirement.

We’ve gotten this nice new furniture. It’s a little more collaborative—where two people at a time can sit, and before we had not special furniture but whatever we could kind of find and maybe buy off the shelf, which worked for its time but it wasn’t really set-up for collaboration. Or privacy in some cases. So we now—still—have the machines but we’ve taken away the terminals so that people just have a place to sit and use their laptops. And we will see people are working with their laptops still. And then even at the terminals they’ll have their laptops, iPhones, you know, everything laid out.

So in fact we’ve gone now from adding machines to taking them away. Awhile ago—maybe two to three years ago—we implemented Envisionware. The terminals under the
desk, and you will find this whenever you go to State, because State is really locked down—some of it is a different philosophy—some of it is where they are situated in a capital city—but it’s, they don’t have as many terminals for visitors as we do, but our terminals used to be totally open and basically . . . we know because someone was on the bus and overhead someone from the homeless shelter or even just when you landed in Chapel Hill you were told to go to the library because it was free. So . . . that was fine but we were having fights break out over that. So we still wanted to provide access but except for the terminals under the staircase—most terminals—you have to log in with an Onyen. But if you’re a registered borrower, if you’re from Duke, State, Central, another community college—if you’ve paid the 25 dollar borrower fee then you get a log in and you can be there all day.

If you don’t then you can just go to the circulation desk, show them a picture ID, and get an hour of Internet access. We have ways which if someone is a visiting scholar and they’ve come here we can extend their time. People at reference can do that, and we again have tried to be cognizant of the fact. We have the scanners over on the reference side and we have public scanners. We see our mission as a public university in a different philosophical way I think than State does and again some of that is philosophical and some of that is practical. But I don’t think they have a separate suite of scanners that are set-up just for the public to use.

We have specialized CD-ROMs. We have electronic access, which we do have to sign people on with passwords. We sign out headphones at our desk. We have other special things patrons can access.

I: When you made the shift over to the commons was there a restructuring of the staff—what their roles and titles were?

Davis 1: No—the big shift in terms of that happened was the shift to electronic information services. Within reference and when I came there had been two separate reference desks. There’d been two separate reference departments—a humanities reference desk on one side and then BASS (business and social science) had government documents (we kept the discs on this side) because the documents are in the basement. So in the midst of also doing this they were consolidating staff. So, that had happened and then six months later the big question was, we have staff then divided into different sections sort of more for administrative, who’s-your-supervisor sorts of reasons. But the big debate at that point was the people at the EIS were proposing that only people in EIS staff that desk, along with students. And I said no. I didn’t want to have a reference desk in which some people were print reference people and some were electronic reference people. So everyone who worked at one desk worked at the other desk.

That was a change for people—to all of a sudden be responsible but six months earlier the person that was good about finding you medieval manuscripts had to learn about how to do consumer price index. This was a little thing and in fact one of our humanities librarians at the time turned us on to Google. “There’s this cool, new search engine,” she said. We were using Yahoo—other kinds of things. It was a time when you could
actually keep track of new Web sites because Yahoo would announce them and you
would see the new Web sites that week.

That was the big thing—and so from then on it was really—we had separate information
desks to deal with that. For a while we still had network CD-ROMs which we’d had
before all of this and then again, as we were able to get things electronically, we were
able to afford them. At some point, staffing that extra desk was too much of a staffing
burden since we had cuts. It’s one of those incremental things. You start by carrying one
brick, then two bricks, and eventually you can lift the whole house. It wasn’t like we
were a new library and we’d never had it before. There was the Internet, then this, then
that, you know.

It’s been incremental as to what services we’ve added and subtracted.

I: Did your own job personally change significantly as a result of this transition towards
the Web and the information commons? Was the reference job still a reference job? Was
it still the same?

Davis 1: Yeah—you’re helping people find information. Information is just in a different
place. Back in the olden days you would use Reader’s Guide. It would have one plan of
access. You would then go to Psychological Abstracts. You had to look in two books in
Psych Abstracts. So, how you handled a question with reader’s guide was different than
a question in Psych Abstracts. It’s not too much of a leap to say the interface for Psych
Abstracts is the interface from this company and the interface for Reader’s Guide is from
another company. Now we can download. Now we can do things.

That’s why in the very beginning I didn’t want to divide us up by format. It’s just
reference.

Some of the things we’ve gotten involved with people don’t end up using—text analysis
software, for example. But we’ve continued to expand our services.

I: Do you have any interesting stories about this gradual process of transitioning the
library from pre-Web to a Web world?

Davis 1: I think the fact that “we were a section of the reference department” was the
library’s Web presence for quite a good number of years. And it was like, we did it
because a section head said this is where you go if you need to talk to (blank out name),
but the rest of the reference department wasn’t ready for that. We still tried to push on,
though.

I: In terms of evaluating from 1997 to now is the information commons as it exists today
what you thought it would be back then, before you made these changes? Has it become
what you wanted it to become?

Davis 1: I don’t think we’re doing the “cookbook” information commons. That is
partially because some of those services are offered in UL. We did some parts of the “cookbook” but not other parts of it. We’re just putting out the tools for people to use and helping them use them. I think there’s more—in some ways the transition was going from being the keepers of—it’s like we had CD-ROMs but now they’re not just in the reference area and we can’t be there to help people. What will they do without the librarian there? That people kind of got over once we networked CD-ROMs. The fact that people were doing horrible searches and not finding information we had happen before. And one of the things we’re now looking at is those discovery systems.

In some ways, not much has changed since we rolled it out in ’97. We have generic and we have specialized, and we have generic and we have specialized. So, we are still working with patrons with new technology. We expect it since in the 2 or 3 years that we’d rolled out one service that we had to go from 3 or 4 to 50. Part of that had to do with the catalog, which was Web based.

One of the things we’ve done, we thought it wouldn’t be odd if you came to the library and wanted to read a physical book! We have stand-up terminals where you can actually see/check the catalog, and since we are a regional gov docs depository we have special machines for that. But also if you just wanted to get access. . . . The idea was that we would give people access to certain things they might conceivably look for.

I think it’s just been more incremental. One thing that happened this summer was when they did finally present the design for the placement of new library furniture, we did ask to rearrange some of those things so they would fit the machines that we had and support the collaboration we foresaw. We’re still making changes and waiting for some tables to arrive.

I: What do you think will be going on in these types of information commons spaces in the future? Will we move toward fewer machines and more student laptops?

Davis 1: Yeah, I think we’re just seeing that. No one complained when we took away terminals and gave students room to spread out. I think we’re seeing a movement toward more higher-end computing. We’re also working a lot with mobile technologies. Electronic books is a big issue we’re dealing with. People hear we have them and think they can actually use them. We’re trying to work with the publishers, but this has been challenging. So I think some of it is to try and adapt. We see this adapting to what students are doing and perhaps having some of the same services they have in the UL here as well.

I: Are there any other comments you’d like to make?

Davis 1: Well, that we’ve always had the very highest-end computing here but at the same time the library has always, perhaps better than the ITS, does a good job supporting the legacy of a historical library. A library is always cognizant of the fact we might have a great CD-ROM people use that runs on Windows ’95. If it’s only available that way then we have to get it that way. We still try and negotiate licensing but some of our
things have to be password-protected. We see ourselves adapting to current technologies to help students.

We did see with our new furniture, and when UL got refurbished, there was a big surge—I think part of it is the economy and parents want their children to graduate on time so they come to the library more often to study. But also the place is crowded in general. We find that talking with our friends in the UL that their terminals are always in use, whereas ours aren’t necessarily because we have many more. But that’s a different kind of thing.
D.H. Hill Transcript 1

Interviewer: How long have you worked at the library?

D.H. Hill 1: It’s been about 12 years.

I: In what capacities?

D.H. Hill 1: Initially, I had a position in the Inter-library and Document Delivery Services, and then I was head of that department. That was the first couple of years. And then I moved into a new unit we created in about 2000, and that was a distance learning services unit. We sort of had a Web site—everybody had their Web site by then—and so that sort of worked. Sort of. And then you had an increasing number of distance education students, but more than that all these people wanting to use the library from offsite. Unlike GM or some place, you pretty much just have information about yourself on your Web site. That’s sort of the end of it. With libraries there’s a whole lot more.

So that unit focused on distance education students but in fact was developing interfaces and thinking about the Web site in a way that tried to make it as functional as possible from offsite. We joked that if we did well we would work ourselves out of a job, which actually we did. And so then I moved into the Research and Information Services unit in 2005. It was part of a consolidation in a way.

I: Were you a staff member at the library prior to the implementation of today’s learning commons?

D.H. Hill 1: Yeah absolutely.

I: Were you involved with the planning of it at all?

D.H. Hill 1: I was, yeah.

I: What were your responsibilities?

D.H. Hill 1: We had—the planning wasn’t terribly formal. So there wouldn’t be a very clear division of labor. We had a planning group which was very cross-departmental. It was a good number of middle managers (IT, digital library, me, research and information services, and then a couple of key administrator level positions, and probably a couple other random ones thrown in). It was nice in that it was fertile. We planned by looking at a lot of other institutions. There was a point when we realized this was coming so when people had the chance to travel that was one of the things they took pictures of and stuff like that. Various libraries in TRLN had just completed things they were calling “commons” or they were planning or they were midway. So we had a little symposium—I don’t think I can remember the year—probably about ’05 or something like that. And we got together for breakout sessions and conversations about that and also a lot of pictures of other spaces we’d pulled—both interesting functional kinds of
spaces as well as “here’s Indiana, here’s Chicago, here are certain other institutions.”

So we did things like that to try to educate ourselves. And brainstormed ideas about floor plans and sort of what is the service mix, what does the computing environment look like—things like that.

I: When you set out to make the commons, did you envision it in any way changing the experience of library patrons in any fundamental ways?

D.H. Hill: Yeah I think so—the library before had very little space for any kind of social or collaborative (maybe “collaborative” being the more academic term), but also just purely social backdrop. That “thing” where there was more than one person involved. We couldn’t really accommodate that very well. The square footage where the commons is now had about 65 computers in angry little rows because we tried to fit as many computers into that amount of square feet as we could. And we didn’t want them taking over so jammed them into a corner just as hard as we could. So you see a real struggling to even just look at the same screen with one other person. Not to mention the fact that their backpacks are slaughtering the person behind them. It was just so tight.

So we had that and then, like many libraries still do, the world’s largest print collection and reference. Ranges and ranges and ranges of that. And then six group study tables. Which of course were always full. Knowing we would have a much greater number of computers, and then knowing—at the moment what we didn’t know—this kind of furniture that can accommodate social work. And I guess knowing—we certainly knew we weren’t going to enforce any kind of noise levels. We knew it was going to be that kind of space.

I don’t think anyone questioned that would be pretty fundamental. I don’t think we ever—I guess because our library is so, that ratio of how many seats we have for the student body is about the worst in the UNC system. So there was a way in which success was easy. We’re still overcrowded. What you don’t want to do is build a space and then no one’s there. We would have had to do something pretty amazing to empty it, to make it so hostile that no one went there.

So we didn’t have doubts about that—I think it was the pieces and then how much of each piece. For me that was the main discussion point. And then the main—I think one of the fundamentals of it is to look from the student’s point of view and think about it in their context as just being part of their—they go from dorm to class to library to restaurant to whatever “that” is—to fit into that better was our goal. Which isn’t a very radical thought, but we had been running our own computing environment with our own printing environment so to move into—from the student’s perspective it behaves just like every other lab on campus. That wasn’t easy, but it was pretty fundamental to the philosophy of the whole thing.

I: Were you involved in reassigning staff members or restructuring staff positions or names of positions?
D.H. Hill 1: A little—moved a few things around—nothing, nobody minded. I don’t recall anything negative. We weren’t doing what some people were doing—for some people what the commons experience meant to them was library staff and campus IT staff getting together and co-staffing or swallowing each other (huge bureaucratic changes). We really didn’t do that.

The most fundamental staffing change is that we started hiring a lot of student workers. That’s been—I can say a lot about that.

We’ve learned a lot from that—it’s been really enriching and has opened our eyes to other possibilities.

I: When it came time to actually implement the commons were you a staff member at that time also?

D.H. Hill 1: Yes.

I: What do you remember about the process of actually changing the physical space? Is anything really salient for you?

D.H. Hill 1: You mean like decisions on how to lay it out?

I: Yes.

D.H. Hill 1: I think one of the things was that—the director was very involved—she was interested, she had strong opinions about how the space should be, which was great. She was really involved and still is. So one thing was that when we were kind of drafting what a floor plan might be / look like, many of us tended to want to group functions, thinking from the user point-of-view, you walk into the space, you can see that’s where I do this, that’s where I do that. And she, kind of working on the final floor plan with the designer and other people, stirred up the floor plan quite a bit more. So when I saw the floor plan I was really quite surprised because there were smaller elements that were repeated throughout the commons.

There is this obviously comfy, soft seating—a little bit couchy—and then you see that sort of again and again and again in different places throughout the commons. And then certain other kinds of competing elements are sort of repeated throughout. A smaller example that speaks to the whole thing is we knew we would have—we opened with about what we have now which is about a third Mac and about 2/3rd’s PC. And so some of us had the impulse to clump those so people would know where those were. But she resisted that and wanted things spread, and I think that was great. I’m so glad she did that because I think it makes—I think it would have sort of been these “ghettos” in a way, and maybe certain functions would be slightly empty at certain times of day—certain rhythms.
As it is, different quadrants of the commons take on their own caste slightly. Everybody knows it’s a little more quiet in this quadrant, and so on. But that quadrant still has some group study, some soft seating, some chairs, some computers. It created all of these microclimates that you wouldn’t have if you just blocked out things. I think that worked out really well.

I: Did your own job change significantly as a result of the implementation of the commons?

D.H. Hill 1: Yeah I think it did because the kinds of service we’re providing at the desk changed. And so the way we needed to train for that and how we wanted to staff for that. And the whole tone we wanted to set was different. So I think in nature in changed—not really in—if you wrote down, boiled it down to six bullets of job responsibility. Those probably wouldn’t really need to be reworded much. But I think the character of it changed a lot in ways I’m grateful for.

I: Do you have any interesting stories related to the implementation process that you remember?

D.H. Hill 1: The implementation or the opening?

I: They could be from either.

D.H. Hill 1: Well—there was a fair amount of discussion about a service point, and you notice I’ve gotten to the point that I say “service point” rather than “reference desk.” There was discussion about that. What were we going to call it? How were we going to assign it? If you’ve seen it, it’s a reaction to the years and years of formal, face-to-face, large, high desks—that kind of service environment which says a number of things. What would be more antithetical to that than low glass tables side-by-side, computers and no sign, nothing. Pretty much some people “out there.” So that was quite deliberate and not 100% popular among staff.

Some people still walk into that space, and they don’t really see it. They walk further in. Sometimes they say, “You should have a sign.” In fact, we do have a sign—a digital one at the end of the table. But signs only achieve so much. You don’t solve everything with signs.

You don’t want to completely disappear. I don’t think a sign is necessarily the way to go, though. There are other ways to set off an area (different flooring, different kinds of overhead structures, something else). But when we opened and the students flooded in, they were very excited about it. They were doing things like showing up in people’s offices. They were poking around saying, “There’s this new space. What’s going on?” There were opening broom closets. It was funny. They walked into offices and asked, “Can we study in here?”

And so when they were still in that spirit, I think it was the first day, this kid walked in
and plopped himself down at the reference desk and sat in one of the chairs and sort of just leaned back, looked at the staff member, and he asked, “So what do you guys do? What’s this for?”

And so then we said, “Well, we’re here to help you find information, make citations, help you with the computers, whatever. You can IM us at 11 p.m. from your dorm room. And he said, “Really? That’s awesome.”

I think if there had been a sign there that said “REFERENCE DESK” he probably wouldn’t have been as curious. The encounter might never have happened. That was kind of cool and in the spirit of the whole thing.

I: The learning commons as it exists in your library today—did it turn out the way you thought it would? Has it become the space you thought it would be?

D.H. Hill 1: I didn’t think about how busy it would be, but I guess it’s even busier. I think it’s more crowded and louder and busier than I thought about.

I: What are some positive and negative things your fellow staff members have said about the commons?

D.H. Hill 1: Some people wish the service point was more visible. Sometimes people don’t see it. The noise is an issue for some students, as well as some staff. Sometimes really loud socializing is going on right at the desk, and you’re struggling to hear what the person next to you is trying to say. So that’s different.

I think some staff were intimidated by the idea of going from computers that had nothing but a browser to computers that have access to hundreds of applications including Auto-Cat and other applications. But in fact, that doesn’t turn into a whole lot of application support. So that was maybe in more the fear category with some people.

I: The term information commons is really changing—every library has their own interpretation—but what do you personally think the information commons is today and where do you see it going in the future? What kind of space do you see it being?

D.H. Hill 1: I think it’s about that cohesion and cohesion and context from the student’s point-of-view on campus. I think campus IT units because of budgets are maybe going to slash labs probably more than they should. People think wireless and laptops is this panacea that it’s not. When I talk to students they say, “I don’t want to rely on wireless when I’m doing this.” They want a hardwired desktop sometimes. I think there’s an opportunity for libraries. These spaces will continue to flourish. I think we may increase production. The demand for tabloid-sized printing, color printing—we’ve got a large format plotter—all the demand for all that is just increasing. At what point are we going to get a 3-D printer? One of the great roles for libraries is that the College of Design has had a 3-D printer for awhile. That’s fine. They’re all set. In the same way, the biology students may already have GPS units. But we can loan GPS units to the humanities
students and provide 3-D printing to the forestry students. We’re sort of this “third place.” We can provide those facilities to the entire campus. I think we’ll just sort of grow beyond—our collection is still the core, though. I think for those libraries that are sort of scared of getting too far away from a core mission, I don’t think there’s any shortage of room to grow.

I: Are there any other remarks you’d like to make?

D.H. Hill 1: I just alluded earlier to working with students. That’s been fantastic because they already know what we’re trying to do. They’ve got all that context. They are students. Whether it’s petty things like “don’t use that learning management system on that browser” or stuff that isn’t so much a matter of training—they’ve got that knowledge. They know about the campus. They know about the campus culture. We try to learn about that more and more, but we learn a lot from them—getting their reactions, their ideas. We can do that through advisory boards, but the students we work with in the commons are really great. From the perspective of limited resources, one aspect is how cheap they are—and I agree that yes, they are—but if they weren’t doing something really great, we wouldn’t be hiring them. I think it’s important to emphasize that. If they’re cheap, that’s collateral. I don’t want people thinking that’s the reason, because it’s way more than that.
D.H. Hill 2 Transcript

I: How long have you worked at the library?


I: And in what capacities have you worked?

D.H. Hill 2: I started as a library fellow and worked in IT—and then I worked half in IT and half in a project under administration creating mobile development tools—which led to work with lending devices, because I also go into lending iPads and things like that.

That was my first position, and I am now the Learning Commons Librarian, which I’ve been for nine months. So now I’m managing the learning commons space.

I: Were you a staff member prior to the implementation of the learning commons?

D.H. Hill 2: No, the learning commons was implemented in 2007. I started after that.

I: Even though you weren’t here, do remember any conversations you’ve had with your peers about that time?

D.H. Hill 2: Definitely—I think that from what I understand, there was a lot of kind of last-minute decision making going on—sort last minute adapting of the space to the actual needs that were present closer to the opening. So they had a plan but made a lot of changes in the way the space was actually implemented by the end of it. That includes the one hallway—there’s a long, wavy banquette that was once map cases and they changed it into a hallway with seating, and I think that’s one of the examples that, rather than have a strict plan, they had some flexibility in that.

I: Were you involved with the organizing of the furniture—of the actual physical space?

D.H. Hill 2: No, I wasn’t.

I: What are you own impressions, though, of the physical space? You obviously came here and worked with what you had, but what are your impressions of it?

D.H. Hill 2: One of the ways it really succeeds is that the physical space, the furniture and the cubicles and the layouts—it lends itself to a type of work that inspires. There’s something about the cubicles not being 90 degrees or a computer lab table next to a table that is open and—just the fact that you can pull a chair up to somebody that’s working on a computer—there’s something natural about that that just communicates that very easily. You can just take a walk over to our quiet reading room which is a traditional space and it becomes more like a library—just by the furnishings, the way that people sit at a traditional table, versus these types of spaces and these types of furniture that really lend themselves to collaboration—and you see artifacts of that all over with the white boards
and it’s that actual studying and work is being done. I think a lot of that has to do with the interior design of the space and the furnishings.”

I: Do you think that the space is successful, as it exists today?

D.H. Hill 2: Yes, I do.

I: What sorts of positive things have your fellow staff members working in the commons said about it?

D.H. Hill 2: I think there’s an energy, and the times that you notice that are when the students are not around. All of a sudden, the commons dies, and there aren’t people there. So, the breaks—you really—there’s a big change in that space. I think there’s a lot of energy created by working in a space where there are students doing work and working in a space where there are medium volume levels and always something interesting going on. I definitely get that feeling from the staff that work in the space—that they’re excited. It’s much more fun to work when it’s active than when it’s not. That’s one sign of its success, I think.

I: How about any negative or frustrating things?

D.H. Hill 2: I think, as a service point, to me—and this is my personal opinion—is the, one of the things that was designed on purpose (as I understand), were the glass reference desks. There is a point where these tables disappear too far. The space was designed to have accessibility so that you wouldn’t have any barriers to walking up and asking for help, but the glass tables become somewhat invisible and by making something invisible you lower—you diminish the power of having the expert sitting at that table helping people. And so, people don’t know who that person is sitting at the table. They don’t know the difference between that person and the person next to them, which is a student worker. It tends to be a librarian and a student worker. So you diminish the sort of expert nature of the librarian by doing that. And I don’t know if the answer is to change the furnishing or maybe that we need to change the way that service point is staffed so that you move the librarian into more of a role where you go to a bank and meet with someone to establish an account that’s different than the teller. And maybe we need to think in those terms. You can always go up to the teller. If they can’t help you they can always pull someone over and have a consultation on the side, and I think that that may or may not be a better model. I think one of the things we do is waste the talent of smart people that are answering printing questions—my own personal opinion.

I: In terms of what students have said, what kinds of positive things have come up about the space?

D.H. Hill 2: Well you see it when they bring tourists through. Students are actively talking—I think they feel very comfortable. It’s safe. It’s definitely a third space for students. There are students that are regulars in different parts of the learning commons. So they definitely feel very comfortable coming in. One of the interesting things I
experience about gaming in the learning commons, since we have gaming there—gaming is generally guys gaming (a very particular group gaming), but I was walking outside in the brickyard overhearing a student talking to her parents about gaming and telling her parents, “That’s our library. It’s really cool. It has a Wii.”

That’s interesting because she probably never played Wii in the library, I imagine. But there is that vibe of fun and playfulness that I think is communicated by gaming. And I think the space communicates that—so I think there are students who recognize that, whether they’re coming in new in the learning commons space or not. They really—it’s an exciting space, and they want to be there. And you just see it because all the seats are full, all the time.

I: How about any negative things / drawbacks?

D.H. Hill 2: It’s loud, so people that are looking for quiet spaces—it’s very much an undergraduate space. I think there are people turned off that are graduate or faculty. They are—the gaming can get in the way of people studying over in that area. There’s never enough seats so there are often instances where people—we only have two study rooms and a presentation practice room attached to that space, and people want more. They’re—I think that’s probably the extent of it. Sometimes, since there are so many people, there aren’t enough resources to go around for all the people that want to use it.

I: There is obviously a lot of disagreement in the formulation of what an information / learning commons is in a library, and its dependent on the context. But personally, what do you think an information commons “is”?

D.H. Hill 2: I think it’s a space where you combine services of different sorts—and we don’t have as many services as some spaces do (like tutoring services or IT services)—it’s where you combine services in a space (and I don’t think it has to be a library space) that includes computing and support of computing in some way, whether it’s display or printing—and combines that with expert help in a way that you don’t see a reference area look like or a computer lab look like. That’s what makes an information and learning commons.

I: Personally, what is the most important thing that being a learning commons librarian—what’s the most important thing you’ve learned during your time?

D.H. Hill 2: I’ve learned—I’m kind of obsessed about staffing lately and have learned that we have amazing student staff—that we have students who have a lot of skills that librarians don’t have and can bring a lot to the service point—and that students can communicate with other students better in some cases and also will do more than you can realize once you can ask them to do it.

My mind revolves a lot around the back-end functions, but I think that’s one thing as I become—I think there’s a potential in learning commons to combine a lot more services than are combined in ours and I think that has some interesting potential.
I: This space as a learning commons in the future—what do you think it will look like? Do you think it will change / stay the same?

D.H. Hill 2: I think it will change. Computing devices like iPhones are becoming so small that there will be less of a need to replicate what you didn’t bring with you because I think a lot of people will be computing on smaller and smaller devices. I think that space will remain important. I think display will become important. I think that expert knowledge in digital media will become more important than it is now. I think that, as you can get more and more answers to reference questions online, the ready reference kind of things, consultation spaces and those types of things will be more important to think about in designing learning commons. And you can just see how different the Hunt Library is to this learning commons. Rather than have just a space called “the learning commons,” it’s really going to be a concept that overtakes the library where the library is a learning commons, and there are specialty spaces within that. You see that already in our Technology Sandbox, which is considered part of our learning commons, but isn’t in the same wing of the library as this learning commons.

I: Do you have any other remarks or comments you’d like to make?

D.H. Hill 2: About learning commons?

I: Or librarianship in general. . . .

D.H. Hill 2: Yeah, I think for librarians in the learning commons area, things that are really interesting are interior design, furnishings, and staffing. All three of these are areas you don’t really get in library school, and I think that’s really—hopefully that will change. I’ve definitely talked to people at SILS about it.

The other thing that—the other piece of managing spaces—is budgets and you don’t get so much about that in library school. I think that, one thing I’ve seen is that there are a lot of ways to implement an interesting space like a learning commons, and it doesn’t always require a big budget. You can see this in cases like UVA, where they haven’t spent as much on furnishings or they don’t have as big an IT budget for particular spaces, but they still find interesting ways to implement that. So it’s not always about spending a lot of money or doing a major revision. You can do a lot by rearranging your current furniture. These are definitely things I’ve thought about—especially as we get to budget crunch times. What is the reality of what makes this space successful? It’s the openness of the layouts, but it doesn’t necessarily equate with spending a ton of money on everything. I think that’s something I’ve started to learn.
D.H. Hill 3 Transcript

Interviewer: How long have you worked at the library?

D.H. Hill 3: Since July 2010, and it’s March 2011 now—so about 8 months.

I: In what capacities?

D.H. Hill 3: I am a fellow so I have a two-year, temporary, full-time librarian job. I’m placed in two different departments. One is the Research and Information Services Department. The other is a newly formed department called the Learning Commons Team. And so it’s kind of an interesting time in the commons because the commons was previously managed by the Research and Information Services Department. And it’s currently sort of in transition to be managed by the Learning Commons Team, so I’m on both sides of that transition. As far as what I do, on the RIS side of things I do instruction. I do a lot of outreach work. I work the reference desk. I do chat reference. I’ve organized our big orientation for new freshmen and done new student orientation things. And then on the learning commons side of things—not meaning the space, meaning the team—we are in charge of tech lending. So I’ve helped to make decisions on what kind of devices to invest in and how to sort of build a program around promoting those and training people on those—and then also working with our student workers . . . getting them to do workshops and stuff in the space, among other things.

I: Were you a staff member prior to the implementation of the learning commons?

D.H. Hill 3: No.

I: Were you involved with the planning of the physical space?

D.H. Hill 3: No.

I: Even though you weren’t involved with the planning, do you remember any conversations people have had “around the water cooler” about the planning and implementation of it?

D.H. Hill 3: Nothing in particular—I know I’ve heard—it’s been a big success with the students. That’s been a big part of the narrative—actually there’s a video online where they cut the ribbon to the space and students came in, and there are interviews with the students, and they’re real positive. People have been pretty uniformly positive about the way the space was designed. I’ve heard use of the space and of the library as a whole has increased tremendously. That’s pretty evident from working here. The space is really heavily used, and it’s hard to imagine it being used much more heavily. Gathering . . . that is an after picture. Part of that is due to the renovation of the space—the new furniture, the new design. So I haven’t heard a lot about what the space was like
beforehand. I’ve never seen pictures of it, even. It’s hard for me to imagine what it was like.

I think there was some contention around the furniture at some point. I’ve heard a bit about that, but I’ve heard also that the furniture was purchased with private money, so it was donated to the effort. And I also think that’s kind of—I don’t give much credence to that anyway—because I think that the furniture is part of what makes the space so nice. And that the furniture is a pretty sound investment when you consider how heavily it’s used. The furniture is high quality, probably has warranties—it’s associated with replaceable parts, and also I think it says something to have students—undergraduate students at a state school being able to use executive furniture. I think it’s a statement of values, really. Maybe that’s a stretch, but I don’t think the criticism of the furniture in that space is really valid.

I: Have you heard any funny / interesting stories about the actual changing of the physical space?

D.H. Hill 3: No—not really. I know that the space was under construction for a long time. It must have been a problem for people.

I: Even though you weren’t involved with the planning or implementation, do you think that during your time here that it’s been a success—that it’s a successful space?

D.H. Hill 3: Certainly. It’s—most librarians seem to face the problem of trying to get people to come through their doors and use their spaces, and we don’t really seem to have that problem. You’re here on a Friday when our use is much less than it is Monday through Thursday.

But also I think there’s some statistics to look at around the way the student population has grown—so the number of students enrolled has grown tremendously—around the same time of the beginning of the renovation, and so I think that some of the use differences can be attributed to that as well. Because we’ve gotten a lot more students. We haven’t grown in terms of footprint space, so it’s easy to get more students in the doors when there are a larger number of students at the school.

I: What positive things have your fellow staff members said about working in the commons?

D.H. Hill 3: I think there’s kind of a—it’s more of an aesthetic thing—it’s not really, it’s hard to put into words. I know that people have a really positive feeling just walking through there when they come into work. For example, one of my colleagues who works in the digital libraries initiatives department and the metadata department doesn’t work in the commons at all (she doesn’t staff the desk or interact with users in the space) but she just walks through there in the morning and in the evening. I know she has a really positive feeling about the space and also about the library as a whole just through the experience of that space. It’s really a good feeling to see the library so heavily used. It
really makes you see the value of your work.

As far as other positive things, I think you hear anecdotes about positive interactions people have—though none of them come to mind.

I: How about any negative things? Any frustrating things staff members have brought up?

D.H. Hill 3: Yeah—sometimes you’ll see people playing games—so we have gaming in the commons—and you’ll see the same people playing games day after day after day, which has a negative connotation, I think. I think noise is sometimes problematic. And also I think there are problems related to computing, which is no different than if it was a typical computer lab. Probably the most frequent problems we get are computing and printing. That’s disheartening, but when it takes someone 5-10 minutes just to log on to a computer, or it takes someone 15 minutes to open a file—but those aren’t really problems that have to do with the design of the space or even necessarily anything the library has control over. The printing we don’t control. It’s not supported in-house. So what else?

I think it’s a pretty uniformly liked space. There are supply and demand problems sometimes. But it’s just a matter of being on a campus with a lot of students and a finite amount of resources.

I: How about some positive or negative things students have said?

D.H. Hill 3: I think the commons is really a showpiece for not only students who are in school here, but we have tours come through on a daily basis. Since I do a lot of outreach to prospective students and sometimes more recently we’ve done things with admitted students who haven’t committed to come here yet but are back for a visit. Almost all of them, if they’ve gone on a tour of campus, they’ve gone through the commons. The ones who haven’t, when they see pictures of it, they’re generally impressed. You hear people say things like, they’ve never seen a library that looks like this before, or it just looks really nice. People seem to really like the workstations. People really like the book scanners that we have.

I think some people certainly like to study around other people in a social, loud type area. I’ve heard that expressed. I’ve also heard it expressed that someone really likes the space and the furniture, but that it’s too loud in there. If someone really wants the nice furniture, but they don’t want the social atmosphere and noise, they’re kind of out of luck.

I know there have been complaints about gaming, too. There’s sort of conflict. It’s not very—it’s not a real heated battle. There are people who are pro-gaming. There are people who are anti-gaming. And it’s not just the gamers who are pro-gaming, but I think that’s something that’s controversial—has been and will continue to be. I think there’s a reason why the library hasn’t decided to sequester the gaming. We could just put it in a room on the other side of the building, but I think there’s a reason why that
hasn’t been done. It gives a certain energy to the space.

I: Part of what this study is trying to do is come at a better definition of what an information commons / learning commons is. In your own opinion, what do you think an information commons “is” as a space.

D.H. Hill 3: Well, I see it as public space—which is a troubling phrase to use because it’s not really open to the public. The computers in there, you have to be a member of NC State. You have to have a UnityID. It’s students, faculty, and staff only. But it’s open space, study space—the social is definitely a big part of it. And that means people working together in groups. That means people telling their friends to meet them there and being able to discover each other in the space. I think it has computing as a component but is not just a computer lab. I don’t think there’s an inherent reference collection in the space. In ours, there is reference along the walls. That used to be where the reference library was, but I don’t think the place needs to have that. I think some level of professional support—some level of librarian and/or student worker support that supports research and discovery of information and getting your studies, getting your homework done. I think that’s kind of what makes it a library thing and not just a computer lab or campus IT thing. But I think there have been similar spaces that have been created by—in fact there’s one on this campus that’s been created by campus IT—it might even be called an information commons.

It’s kind of an interesting comparison: what makes this a library space? It’s an open question—especially when, at the reference desk, sometimes it feels like the majority of the questions you get are about printing or about some sort of computing problem where really someone from campus IT would be as well-equipped to answer that question as someone with a MLS.

So I think it’s defined—almost defining itself by the way people have decided to design it and the way people decided to use it.

I: What do you think the information / learning commons of the future will be like in this library? Do you think it will change significantly?

D.H. Hill 3: I think it will stay the same for a long period of time because it has so much momentum. It’s so popular that I don’t see the configuration changing much. It’s possible that it will go to a primarily student-staffed space and that the reference librarians will sort of be on call rather than at the desk. I think the computers are really heavily used, and I see that going well into the future. I don’t think people are going to stop using personal computers—only use touch based computing or anything like that. I would think this one would last for a really long time just because it’s so popular, and I can’t see that really changing—although if more spaces within this library get renovated and get nicer furniture, you might see attendance in the space die down, but we’ll see.

I: What is the most important thing your own interaction working in the commons has taught you about librarianship in general?
D.H. Hill 3: I think there’s a real lesson to be learned about design, and not just like the practice of designing a space but the effect of designing a space and of the design of furniture and of the design of things like lighting and accessories that I think is something that was profound to me when I first saw the space and that I continue to take with me. The furniture in there is really nice. Some of it—like the orange chairs you have seen, there’s a little area called the banquette—those are Ames chairs. They’re a really classic chair design from the 50’s. The brown leather chairs are also Ames chairs—a different model. The green chairs are Herman Miller chairs. They’re kind of icons of furniture design, which I didn’t really know when I first saw the space. But I think having those classic pieces of furniture and the quality and aesthetics that go along with that really make the space have a certain feel that’s different from the sort of cheap, institutional furniture you see in other spaces, where it’s just obvious that they did not want to spend the extra money on furniture, or they didn’t see it was worth it. I think there’s a real difference in feel to the space. And that might be disappointing to some people—that really you should spend a lot more money on furniture than you would like to—when really we’d rather you spend the money on our librarian expertise or our reference collection, etc. But I think that when the goal is to create a space which is inviting, which inspires creativity and which makes people want to stay there for long periods of time and makes people feel social and comfortable, I think that those design elements really have a big effect. That to me is one of the main lessons—that’s “the” main lesson.

I think the kind of variety of spaces is probably another lesson—having the kind of lounge spaces, the individual desk seating, the desks which allow for other people to sit, for small groups to sit together—and then also integrating the technologies. The book scanners were put in the middle of the space, which makes them easily discoverable. And it also gives them the kind of exposure that leads to higher use. So if people consistently see other people using them in the space they get the picture that you can scan a book at that book scanner you’ve walked by four times in the last week. Another example of that is the touch screen computer that we have right around the corner from the reference desk. It’s walked by thousands of times every day. It gets used just because it’s there. I think it meets people’s needs. If it’s not kind of in their way or in their path, then it won’t get used.

So, once you have a space that’s high traffic, you can use that to sort of build on other tools and services, and I think that we do that somewhat effectively and somewhat haphazardly, and I think there’s more to be done using just the mass amount of traffic and people that come through that space and the lobby space in our library. We’re a real center for activity on the entire campus. I think that represents a tremendous potential. Maybe that’s something a lot of commons are able to do. I’d be curious to see what other people use with that potential.

I: Do you have any other remarks or comments you would like to make?

D.H. Hill 3: I wonder if there’s something going on with the terminology—“information commons” / “learning commons”—what does “information” mean? What does
"learning" mean? One of my colleagues who has a PhD in education is always asking the question, “What’s our definition of learning? What’s the learning that we are ascribing to this space? What’s our theory of learning as it relates to the way the space was designed and the way our services are designed, and I don’t think that we have one. We haven’t thought that out as much as we could have.

I think there’s an inclination among the library world to sort of claim to be experts in learning when really we’re experts in information resources, and there’s a difference there. And it’s pretty clear in bibliographic instruction sessions that we’re not experts in learning. At least in my experience. Some people are probably really good at it. And we also get teachers who’ve decided to enter the library profession, and they’re much more attuned to that. But I think there’s not really a definition or measurement of actual learning objectives and how we’re meeting them or how we’re helping students to meet them. There’s no measurement in that realm, which I think is something that’s lacking.
Interviewer: How long have you worked at the library?

D.H. Hill 4: I have worked here since 2001, so almost 10 years.

I: In what capacities?

D.H. Hill 4: I started here as a library fellow. So from 2001 to 2003—and then my first position here was working with instruction for distance education. And then my position has developed more into working with online learning in all manifestations. I typically now describe my job as being at the intersection between the library and online learning and learning technologies.

I: Where you a staff member prior to the implementation of the information commons?

D.H. Hill 4: Yes.

I: Where you involved with the planning of it at all?

D.H. Hill 4: The planning was primarily done more at an administrative level rather than at a department level. At the time that we opened, I was in RAS—this department—and our department head was more involved because there was a smaller group. I have been more involved with planning for the Hunt Library.

I: Did your involvement include any planning of the physical space?

D.H. Hill 4: That was done by the group that was assigned to the learning commons renovation.

I: What kind of issues / conversations have people had “around the water cooler” about the information commons at that time? Were people excited about it?

D.H. Hill 4: Yeah—people were excited. I remember there was anticipation of, “What was this going to mean?”—I thought it was really exciting—because I think the shift toward a learning commons model is really important, a very user-centered model. I thought it was pretty exciting. We would have department meetings where we would talk about things we were going to change out. But I also remember there being some staff anticipation of what that was going to mean—particularly how would staff address technology issues out there when librarians perceived themselves as being experts in something different than that. Not how to use a computer program and whatnot. So there was some questioning and anticipation, and it was, well, we’ll just have to see how it’s going to work out. We’ve always had students working out there. We have a really robust system of using students now, but when we opened we had a system where we were using students, so that can help sort of translate over to the student experiences and answers to questions like, “How do you use your file space on campus?” for example.
I: Where you a staff member at the time the physical space of the commons was implemented?

D.H. Hill 4: Yes.

I: What are your memories from that experience?

D.H. Hill 4: When we did the renovation it wasn’t just the physical space out here that you think of as the learning commons. They also renovated this office space here—so librarians, there was the great RIS diaspora. We were scattered all over the building—sometimes in offices up in the stacks. We’d have two people in one of those. We had to move several different times. We had to move the reference desk to the west wing of the building. This area was totally blocked off for a long time. We would sometimes get to come in and see what was happening. The space out here had a ton of reference shelves—your typical stacks—those were all being moved. It was a big thing for the subject librarians. I don’t really identify strongly as a subject librarian. It’s not a big part of my job, but it was an important thing for the subject librarians to weed down the reference collection and disperse some of that back into the circulating collection and figuring out what was going to be contained here. That was a really big project because it was the movement of a ton of volumes and then trying to make those decisions.

I was a little big involved with that, but I was a witness working in a department where a lot of that work was going on. I remember us talking about what’s the reference desk area going to be like, how will it be staffed, what kind of signage will there be, how will people know—that sort of thing.

I: How did this redesign either align or depart from your own impression of what the information commons space in an academic library “should” be like?

D.H. Hill 4: I thought it was really exciting. When that happened it was 2006. The learning commons opened in March of 2007. I—we did a lot of talking—another thing we did is the administration brought in speakers from other libraries that had implemented learning commons. We had someone come from—Kritz Stewart—he had been at Georgia Tech at the time—he now works for ARL, and he’s awesome. He did a great presentation, and they have a wonderful learning commons there if you’re not familiar with it. A woman came from Minnesota—talked about theirs. We got some different takes on how they had done staffing and worked with the space. That was exciting because the administration was trying to get everyone to understand this transition and what we are going through. So I think that generated excitement. And—what did you ask me?

I: I think you fleshed it out.

D.H. Hill 4: Read your question again, please.
I: How did that new physical space either align with or depart from—

D.H. Hill 4: Yeah, yeah—like I said, excitement. For me, I remember becoming very excited because I think that in a learning commons the student-centric nature of the learning commons is incredibly important, and I think it helps libraries go from we help you with information to we can be holistic with helping you from the minute you get your assignment to—and it may not even be related to library research, period—but there’s a space for you, but also we can follow you all the way through from you getting it all the way to producing the product, and we can help you with research, with technology—and I feel like that’s a very important mindset for librarians. Just to be among students a lot more—I don’t think we anticipated or could have foreseen how popular our learning commons is.

Even though I work primarily with online learning, I’ve always thought of my job as being the online equivalent of a learning commons. That a learning commons is a physical space—people talk about them in terms of physical space—but it’s actually an approach as well . . . a very student-centric approach where you’re trying to think about the user from the full range of the kinds of support they need to be successful and happy and socially connected learners . . . then, how can we do that online? Does that make sense?

I: Sure, absolutely. Do you remember any interesting stories about the implementing of the commons when all that change was happening?

D.H. Hill 4: I can’t think of any specific stories about it opening—other stories about the commons but not so much the implementation itself. I mean a huge amount of planning went into the learning commons—especially from the core team that was working on it.

I: Do you think the processing of implementing it brought the staff closer together or created some tension?

D.H. Hill 4: I think it probably did bring staff closer together. In fact, I think that—again—ten years into my own career, I feel like my department has become more collaborative. And I feel like we do a lot more team-based things, and I think that’s a change in librarianship in general. It may be affected by a more dynamic type of service model where we work together. We have to do a lot of triage. We always do that in triage—we have a very active reference desk. It’s like a doorbell that gets rung at the reference desk if they need extra staff, so we can go a’runnin’. And again, an example—you can think of a learning commons as a physical space, but there are online corollaries to that—for example, virtual reference. You have extremely active virtual reference, and I think part of that is sometimes there are people chatting with us from out there. They don’t go to the reference desk, but we have chat access all over our Web site. So we are chatting with people a lot. That’s an extension of the space, if that makes sense. Because there are people in the space, and they don’t want to pack up there computer and go—or they may not even know where to go exactly—but they see that button to ask for help, and they do. I think those type of services bring department closer together, too.
I: What are some positive and negative things your fellow staff members have said about their work in the commons?

D.H. Hill 4: Positive things—I’ve heard many times, where we are located we get to walk through the learning commons a lot, and we get to see all that activity. We’re much more busy when the students are here. This is the hub of our campus in many ways. We’re among them a lot. There’s a lot of diversity. You get to know students. You may not know their name, but you see them all the time. I feel like we’re more in touch with students. It’s exciting to be able to walk through that space and be connected to that. We’re all jazzed that more students are in the library. That’s exciting—and that we are responsive to their needs.

We also have developed an excellent model of using student assistants at the reference desk and the digital media lab. It took a little while to figure out what that dynamic was like, but it’s really fun to work with those students, to have them as colleagues, and to learn from them. I’m working with one of the students who used to work in the learning commons—he just graduated—he’s working on another project with me—just to pick his brain and to have that easy access with students because you work so much together and get to know each other well, can really connect with and better understand students. So that’s something positive.

Negative—I don’t know if it’s negative but it goes with the territory—printing is always a pain, trying to keep up, there’s a lot of little details with all that’s going on in a space. All of the Macs are down today for some reason, temporarily or such-and-such weird printing thing is happening. . . . We have a really robust FAQ system where we share knowledge about that amongst ourselves as well as with patrons. That I think is—keeping up with those details, you know?

I: Sure. How about from the student perspective? What kinds of positive / negative things have they said about their experience in the space—either to you or your colleagues?

D.H. Hill 4: I’m a good person to ask that because I’m involved with all of this user research stuff. We’re doing photo interviews with students where we give them a camera and a checklist of things to take pictures of and they have 20-30 minutes where they go around and take pictures based off those prompts, and we sit down and do a 30-40 minute interview with them about their pictures that gets at their experience using the library.

I: Wow. That’s great.

D.H. Hill 4: Yeah, it’s been cool.

It’s cool to hear—you might have students who love the gaming out there and students who don’t love the gaming. The woman I interviewed yesterday loves the gaming, but she’s not a gamer. She likes that it’s there. Then you’ll have other people that will be
like, “I don’t get it. I don’t understand why it’s here.” There are students who gravitate toward that activity out there—if they’re studying they like to be among it. Even if they’re studying alone, they like to be near it. Then there are students who really need more quiet than that. And so, they think it’s way too loud in there. They would prefer it if we had nicer furniture up in the book stacks. But I think if you spend some time out there, there are—and this is a word I got from another staff member—“microclimates” out there. Here on a Friday you can’t see the full, dynamic nature. You should come some time when you can see what it’s like at full capacity.

You definitely don’t please everyone, but I’ve seen students walk in—and you can just see—new students, or students coming in with their friends, or students walking around on a campus tour, and they totally perk up. Another thing is I think we might be shifting toward more students wanting—being interested in becoming librarians, working in libraries. I was talking to another library staff member about this because I had a student contact me who was a freshman who had to do a paper about her career, and she wanted to interview a librarian, so I did an interview with her. There’s a woman here today who’s a college student who wants to be a librarian. A friend of mine who works in digital library initiatives, he wants to do iPad development, and he was interested in what we are doing here. He’s in high school. I think students don’t necessarily don’t know what librarians do, but I think our learning commons is exemplifying libraries as dynamic, cool places. I think it might—I wonder what kind of impact that might have. You can see—we know we do a lot of cool work, but I think it’s becoming more obvious to students that libraries are really neat spaces.

I: Part of the purpose of this study is to come to a better understanding of what information / learning commons are. You spoke a bit—you said an information commons is an approach rather than necessarily a physical space. Do you have a definition of an information / learning commons?

D.H. Hill 4: Well, I do think that when you use that term “learning commons” we are talking about physical space. I do think that. But I think that work that’s done to extend libraries into where teaching and learning is taking place online is an extension of the mentality that goes with the learning commons. And so, a “learning commons” is a student-centric, student-responsive. or user-responsive space where they have access to a variety of types of informal learning spaces—be they quiet or bustling—access to people who can help them and access to technology.

I: What do you think the learning commons at this library will look like in the future? Or a theoretical one at other libraries?

D.H. Hill 4: The future of the learning commons—this is something I’ve been thinking about too because we’re building a new library—we’re planning a library for the next 50 years. Not very often do libraries get to build from the ground up. So the Hunt Library—and I’m involved with this grant that’s focused on informal learning spaces—meaning non-classroom learning spaces . . . what do they look like and what will the next generation look like? I think one of the cool things about learning commons is how a
library is a democratic space. And that’s a word I feel like I’ve picked up from another staff member. In the sense that we sit between colleges on our campus, and we have—just like we loan out books, we loan out technologies—and we have access to things in this building, in this space, that are for everyone on campus. I think—especially on this campus, with this library (we’re a very technology-driven library)—I think that you’re going to continue to have people building spaces that are responsive to what people need (flexible furniture, a wide variety of climates, environments within the spaces in libraries). And then they’re going to have technologies there that not everyone can have access to. So, in our case we’re doing a lot with multi-touch displays—and if you’ve seen the Technology Sandbox—and not all libraries are going to do that, but even access to projectors where students can be in a group study room and hook up their own computer and display—what’s going on there is access to technologies that they don’t have access to on their own. Just like a library has books that you don’t afford on your own . . . or your textbook . . . or access to journals . . . access to all these technologies. The Yale Law School Library has a puppy that can be checked out by the law students. I don’t know if we’ll go down that path, but you know what I’m saying? Things that not everyone has access to.

I: What is the most important thing your interaction with the learning commons has taught you about librarianship?

D.H. Hill 4: It’s really interesting to think—going along with the interest in new learning spaces that are happening—there are also things going on with user research, if you’re familiar with anthropology work that the University of Rochester’s done. They have a book called Studying Students. It’s all about ethnographic work they did studying their students. This sort of thing comes out of work like the kind they did. For me, the more I’ve had opportunities to get to know students—not just as people I watch and interact with at a reference desk—but have opportunities to interact with them where I am eliciting more about their life experience—I feel like I have a richer perspective on how to help them, how to think about them, how we should design services and spaces for them. For me, it’s been not just working in a learning commons but being put into unique positions where I’ve been able to interview students. To have them take pictures and see what their life is like. That’s cool. And also just being around students so much. But that user research part to me has given a more multi-faceted dimension to understanding—not just how they use a library, but how they use campus, how they work with others, how they use technology.

I: Do you have any other remarks or comments you’d like to make?

D.H. Hill 4: No—I mean—I would say one thing, wouldn’t call it a negative but something I think is challenging libraries in general is, as libraries become very focused on space and services in space there are some questions that get raised about what happens to subject expertise for librarians. How important is it for librarians to be subject experts in such-and-such. I think some people might view that as a negative. It’s definitely an important question. But at the same time, does that mean the learning commons—because they tend to be really undergraduate-centric—could you have
reference models that free up reference librarians to do other interesting liaison work in new ways with departments or things like that? How do you bring those types of liaison experiences into the mission of the learning commons—the programming and the things you’re doing? One of the things we’re looking at with our new library is we’re going to have a graduate commons and a faculty commons. Those two spaces are designed for those communities of interest. This is not a space that graduate students resonate with—they like the furniture and the potential of the space—but it’s too loud for them. It’s too bustling for them. With the graduate commons the idea is we will have what they need in a space—they’ll have card access to it—and it will be a really nice space for them with reservable study rooms and presentation spaces . . . stuff like that.
Davis 2 Transcript

Interviewer: How have you worked at the library?

Davis 2: I’ve worked for ESM for a year and a half.

I: And in what capacities?

Davis 2: I’ve worked for the Serials Department in two positions. One is working with incoming serials and microfilm, making sure they get out and shelved on time and itemizing new microfilm. The other job that I do is itemizing old serials that didn’t get catalogued when Davis implemented the new cataloging system Millennium.

I: Were you a staff member prior to the implementation of the information commons?

Davis 2: Yes.

I: Were you involved with the planning of the commons at all?

Davis 2: No.

I: Do you recall any conversations you’ve had with your peers about the planning of the information commons?

Davis 2: We were definitely talking about the changes as they were going on and how we felt about them and what we saw—not necessarily having to do with the actual “planning,” but what we thought about what was going on at the time.

I: What was the general feeling of the library staff about the information commons? Were they excited about it?

Davis 2: Yeah—everybody was really happy to see the ugly, nasty carpeting go.

I: And were you personally excited? Do you remember how you felt?

Davis 2: It was a little anxiety-ridden because what my department was doing was moving all of the serials from their old location to down in the basement—so we have to keep them all organized. And then, once everything was set up in the room, we were able to bring them back, but we were on a really tight schedule so it was a little nerve-wracking.

I: Were you a staff member when the information commons was actually first implemented?

Davis 2: Yes.
I: What do you remember about the process of that?

Davis 2: First what happened was they packed up all of the old equipment—so desks, computers, chairs—then they came in and did the painting, then they did the carpeting, then they brought in the new equipment, new ergonomic chairs and desks, shelving—that sort of thing.

I: When those changes were made, how did they either align with or depart from your own impressions of what an information commons space “should” be?

Davis 2: When I think of an information commons, I think that there’s a heavy emphasis on the electronic part of it. I think that they did a good job of that, but I don’t think there is enough walk-up space. They’re really trying to focus on giving each student their little cubby space to work in.

I: So individual student learning?

Davis 2: Yeah—a real emphasis on that—which is great because they have group spaces, too, in the reading room where the large desks are. But the information commons area is largely individual desks. The only technology that they seem to have are the desktop computers—they have scanners—but it’s all stuff that relates back to the PC’s rather than having, letting you know that maybe there are iPods or iPads or that sort of thing that you can use.

I: How did your own job change significantly as a result of the commons being implemented?

Davis 2: During the implementation for sure—when we had all the serials in the basement—my job was going up and down the elevators shelving new serials and taking old ones off the shelf. So that definitely changed my job time-wise.

I: Do you remember any interesting stories about the time during which the information commons was being implemented?

Davis 2: There was a bit of drama because the way that the reading room used to be laid out is that each of the shelves were all in the same direction—facing the same way—half of them were tall shelves and half of them were short shelves. The tall ones were probably around 7-8 feet, and the short shelves were probably around 4 1/2. When the new shelving came in, the way that the planner had designed the room was that the majority of the shelves were going to be facing the same direction, but there was going to be one shelf that was perpendicular. So we had to figure out how to shelve materials based on that configuration.

It was quite a hassle trying to negotiate how to do this because Reference decided they actually wanted a say in it, and there was just a lot of drama surrounding that—who should have a say in it and who shouldn’t.
I: In your own opinion, has the information commons at Davis been a success or a failure?

Davis 2: It’s been a huge success, and I can say that with all honesty.

I: Good change?

Davis 2: Wonderful change—before students would use the computer area but the reading room was dead a lot of the time, and I think that was because it was a very dark, uncomfortable place to be—very institution-esque, public-school-esque. But then, once the new furniture was brought in, the new carpeting, the new paint—it just brought a lot of light into the room, and I think students felt a lot more comfortable.

I: What are some positive and negative things that your staff members have said about the commons now that the transition has been made?

Davis 2: One big issue is that a lot of the furniture is movable. So students will oftentimes move the furniture right against the stacks. And then it makes it difficult for other patrons to browse or for staff to shelve materials. That’s been by far the biggest issue.

Here’s another thing—kind of a sidetrack—but not very many actual librarians seem to be consulted, at least in my department. Because they hired basically an interior decorator/architect to design the space, and they designed a beautiful space, but it wasn’t really done with the mind of a librarian.

I: What about some of the positive and negative things students have said that they’ve liked / felt frustrating?

Davis 2: Sometimes in the newspaper area—there are group desks there—and we’ve had problems (because the furniture is movable) with the plugs and the outlets. The plugs run right through the desks, which are great because it means you have outlets on top of the desk, but it also means that the table’s basically connected to the outlet on the floor. So if the table gets moved, then we’ve had problems with the plugs, the prongs on the plugs breaking off. Some of the furniture is broken, but that is about the extent of it.

I: In your own words, what do you think an information commons “is” or “should” be now that you’ve worked in one?

Davis 2: An information commons to me is a public space where people can get information on their own or with the help of an advisor.

I: What do you think the information commons in Davis might look like in the future?

Davis 2: As I said previously, a lot of the technology is focused around desktops, so I think there might be more of a shift towards laptop space possibly, more Macs being
available, and I think there may be more interactive screens available if that type of technology catches up.

I: What is the most important thing that your interaction in the information commons has taught you about librarianship?

Davis 2: What I learned from the implementation was to have an open mind and to make sure you’re always in contact with other departments—because even though it might be frustrating, and you might not see eye-to-eye, keeping the lines of communication open is important so that ideas don’t get lost or trampled on and feelings don’t get hurt. There are a lot of people involved and sometimes people do have an opinion on something, but it might get ignored if they’re not voicing it, so it’s important to go to people and talk about things.

I: Are there any other comments or remarks you’d like to make?

Davis 2: Nothing except that I think overall the implementing of the renovations at Davis Library has definitely had a positive effect on the usability of the space.