Whitney Library Information Commons

Case Overview

Whitney Library serves the 12,000 undergraduate and 3,000 graduate students at Evansville University, a public university in the Midwest in a large metropolitan area. Undergraduate general education goals include development of effective teamwork skills. A Center for Centering Learning on Students (C2LS) survey showed that approximately 25% of courses involved formal group projects, about 30% of those projects requiring documented library research (that is, with a bibliography or using data only available through library databases).

Excerpt from *Evansville University: Principles Advancing Student Success (PASS)*

All Evansville University students will leave EU with these tools for a successful life as worker, family member, citizen:

PASS A.	**Respect for the diversity of American and world cultures**
PASS B.	**Strong oral, written, and numeric communication skills**
PASS C.	**A commitment to personal responsibility for individual work and effective interpersonal skills for team work**
PASS D.	**An understanding of the variety of ways of knowing across disciplines**

Yet the conditions under which students live and work make collaboration difficult. Students are largely (80%) commuters, with 85% older than 25, and over 60% of freshmen reporting employment over 30 hours per week (freshman life survey). People who live off-campus reside across a wide metropolitan area, not clustered in private dorms or student intensive areas.

Students are generally computer literate and familiar with course-management software (used actively in 80% of courses), but they need help using the bibliographic resources and databases. Library-based group projects are especially challenging. Use of existing group study areas is high, and students report frustration in predicting the availability of a place to work.

Evidence has accumulated showing a real problem pitting the curricular goals and needs against library conditions for students. Group projects in a variety of departments required group work using library databases, as shown in the following examples:

Excerpt from *Syllabus for BUS 201: Marketing*

shaping outcomes
Making a Difference in Libraries and Museums

Course description: **Marketing theory and practice, including audience identification, methods of communication, client, brand and product management; course is project-based and integrates consumer and managerial research.**

Final Project **(50% of final grade) This assignment has two components: creating a realistic ad campaign for an assigned product, using open-source (government) demographic data and proprietary (MarketWatch database) consumer information; and analyzing at least 3 pieces of academic literature relevant to the approach you have taken: survey research, complaint behavior, corporate image management, etc. This is a group project. You will be randomly assigned to groups. You will document individuals' contributions to the group effort. Course addresses: PASS B and C**

Excerpt from *Syllabus for EDU 301: Special Education*

Course description: **Built upon an understanding of normal child development, this course reviews diagnosis of and interventions for common physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral causes of learning disability. Through theory and praxis, students develop individual learning plans for test and actual cases.**

Group Project **(50% of final grade): Four students will be assigned an individual case. Provide a diagnosis and a treatment plan covering two years. Document all decisions with citations to the professional literature. Course addresses: PASS C and D**

Yet students found the logistics of such projects daunting. The student newspaper, *The Weekly Scream,* published the following satiric article:

How to Survive a Group Project
1. Take over the bedroom of a group member who lives near campus.
Oh wait. No one lives near campus.
1. Take over a spare office in your department.
Oh wait. There aren't any free (unless we knock off a few T.A.s)
1. Reserve one of the group study rooms in the Library.
Oh wait. There's no reservation system.
1. Find an empty group room in the Library.
Use: Either brute force (wait for a single-occupant to leave for a minute and take her (it's always a "her") stuff and stick it in a carrel or Cell phones. Everybody—spread out! Scout away! Call when you find one!
2. Look over the instructions posted in CourseWorks [course management software].
Oh wait. There's no computer in the group study room.
(you don't all have laptops?)
3. Leave one person in the room.
Everyone else, go down to the computer lab, stand around one computer.
Read the instructions in CourseWorks.
4. Use the MarketWatch database.
Oh wait. It doesn't work like Google.
4. One person goes over to the Reference area and asks for help.
5. Use a computer in the Reference area.
Print out lots of copies.
Call your buddies on the cell phone. DO NOT ATTEMPT WITHOUT A CELL PHONE

The Library logged the following comments in their Suggestion Box:
- I can't ever find a spare study room!
- I was supposed to use Grove's Dictionary for my music class. I couldn't find it on any of those dictionary stands you have. I tried calling down to the information desk but the phone just went to a voice mail.
- Can you get chairs with rollers? It's hard to drag the heavy chairs around when you want to work with a group.
- People use cell phones all the time! Don't you enforce your rules?
- I would pay good money. Well, not much, but I really want to know a computer is available when I need it. I can't work at home.
- People are always sleeping on your nice furniture.

According to the Mission Statement, "The Whitney Library serves the curriculum of Evansville University: providing information resources and services to students, faculty and staff in support of general education, scholarly disciplines, and administrative functions. The Library deploys the most effective combination of technology and content to meet the information needs of its users."

The Library, urged on and supported by the University President, decided to meet curriculum and student needs with an Information Commons pilot program, establishing group spaces with computers near reference librarians.

Profiles of Stakeholders

These are fictional statements typifying attitudes and illustrating needs, not actual direct quotations.

President

"Last week at the Public Universities United annual convention there was a cool presentation on something called an Information Commons. It looked very different from our library. I heard four different presidents say they were putting in information commons. If we don't, we are going to look very stone-age. High schoolers on tour will think our library is just about books."

Head of Reference

"It's discouraging for the librarians at the reference desk to help students who are trying to work on projects elsewhere in the library, particularly the computer lab. If we leave the reference area then other people think there's no one to help them, but if we don't the students have a hard time remembering what we tell them and show them on our computers. We do have a few computers in our area, but we need to save those for accessing the catalog and databases—they aren't meant to be used for wordprocessing, or email."
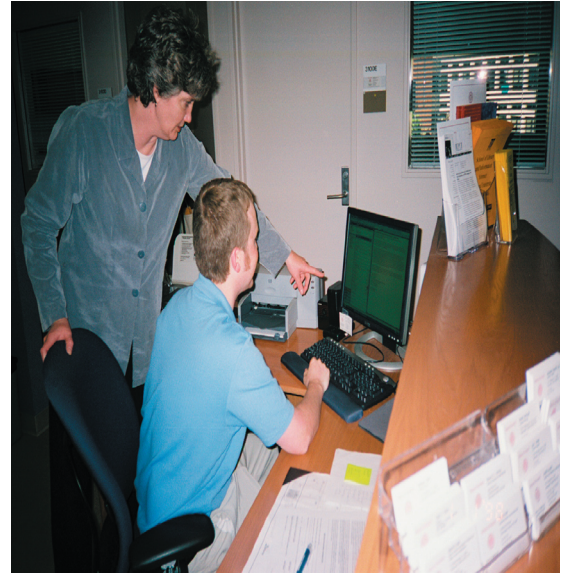
Education Faculty member

"I teach EDU 301, where students develop individual learning plans for special-needs children. They work in groups, like the teams that are in schools, but it is also really important that they use real research to back up their decisions. The students think if they stick 'ADHD' into Google they can use anything they find. I want them to know how to use Wilson Education Index or ERIC."

Undergraduate

"I'm serious about my schoolwork—but I have to work on it mainly on campus because at home it's all about getting housework done and my kid's homework. The Library's a lot calmer: I just block off the time I need.

Lots of times one or two computers will be free, but if I have a study group or a team assignment, there are never two or three computers beside each other. Then when we have questions, the computer tech, all he knows is how to unjam the printer (which is important!) If you go over to where the librarian sits, that's okay but you have to print stuff out, or email it to yourself to go back and work on it."

Chair of Computer Science Department

"My majors are hired as tech consultants for all the labs on campus. Lately we noticed that the labs in the library were recording fewer questions for the techs than the other labs. I thought this was strange, so I recruited some other students to just observe what goes on. Turns out people were asking my techs some questions about how to use the library databases—and that wasn't a tech type of question so they didn't mark it on the log. And they didn't answer them either. They would say, 'Go to the Information Desk.' And then sometimes there would be a librarian in the computer lab helping someone with a database, and someone would ask how to do an at-

tachment, or something like that, and if the librarian answered, that also didn't get written down. So our question logs aren't very valid for the computers in the library. My student manager says all the seniors are choosing to work in the other labs because the Library is too busy."

Library Director

"I was so surprised one day. I overheard some students on cell phones. Of course they aren't supposed to use them, but they do, and of course you shouldn't eavesdrop, but I couldn't help it. I never would have thought to use phones to find out what rooms were empty. Not that we have very many rooms. This library was built 15 years ago when having an open layout was 'the' way to go. Then in the Internet boom you would see pictures of company offices that had very wide open layouts, to help all the workers at a company communicate with each other. That looked very 'in' back then, but really, in a library, you always have some individuals who are trying to study on their own, and glare at groups of students talking. It's not like one company. Everyone needs what they need for their own classes. We try to track needs but it's hard, especially since we don't want to really interrogate people."

Logic Model

Program Name:	Info Commons for Collaborative Academic Work
Abbreviated Name:	Info Commons

Partners & Stakeholders

Program Partners:	Information Technology Services, Evansville University Facilities and Architect's Office, Evansville University Business and Education Department faculty

Stakeholders:	Other librarians	Is this a good model for my own library? Is it effective and efficient?
	Librarians	What will their work schedules look like? What will the effect be on other activities? What will need to change in user instruction? What additional skills will be required?
	Faculty	Will there be suitable spaces for group projects? Will students receive needed information assistance without having to contact professors? Who will use the group study spaces? Will students complain less about group projects? Will the students do better working as groups if they have compatible space in which to work?
	Administration	Will the cost be the same or less than current services? Will our institution's library look modern and appealing to prospective students? Will we be able to better achieve our PASS (Principles Advancing Student Success) goal of effective teamwork skills?

Audience Needs

Needs:	Students need effective technology-equipped group study areas with convenient technology and information search assistance.
Target Audience:	Undergraduate students

Audience Considerations:	Research shows that many library patrons will not ask information questions if doing so is intimidating or even slightly inconvenient. On the other hand, many students view themselves as customers and demand immediate, customer-focused answers to problems with equipment or other services. Neither students nor others clearly distinguish between information technology and information resources. Departmental faculty make group assignments without considering the logistics of students working together. On Evansville University's campus, the largest current seating area outside of classrooms is in the Library (classroom buildings are very busy, food facilities are limited and there is no large-scale student union). As over 80% of Evansville's students are non-residential and commute some distances, campus seems to be the preferred meeting place for student work groups. The physical learning environment—good places to study, work, and receive help—affects how well students can do their academic work.
Solutions:	Create four areas (Infopods) with large-screen computers, seating and desk space for 4-8 students, near to reference and technology assistance. Create a reservation system for the pods.
Desired Results:	Students will find it convenient to use the Infopods to work on group projects and produce work which effectively uses Library resources. Students will integrate research data into written products with complete and suitably formatted documentation.

Program Purpose	
We do what?	Create a pilot Information Commons: several reservable computer-equipped group study spaces (Infopods) located near librarian and computer technician assistance; train InfoCommons staff to provide both information and computer assistance from one help desk
For whom?	Undergraduates who have group assignments
For what outcome?	Undergraduate students will work in groups effectively, using Info-Pod facilities. Undergraduate students using InfoPod services will produce group work products which effectively incorporate technology and information resources.

Evaluation Plan	
Inputs:	Staff time for planning and training; additional technical staff Consultants for design and evaluation Computers Furniture Software Space Faculty and librarian time
Activities:	Coordinate/schedule InfoPod orientation sessions during classes Identifying and purchasing appropriate equipment and furniture Rearranging existing space and furniture Conducting training sessions for InfoCom staff (librarians and computer consultants) Creating a reservation system Publicizing the space, services available, and reservation system Overseeing inventory and budget Evaluating the pilot phase for future expansion
Services:	Classroom faculty and librarians describe to students how the Info-Pods can be used to facilitate group work. Infopod space on a reservation or as-available basis. Provide reference and technology assistance from a desk near the Infopods. Maintain the Infopod computers and printers.
Outputs:	Numbers of students receiving InfoPod orientation Usage of Infopods (or, quantity of non-used Infopod hours) Size of groups using Infopod space (density of Infopod usage) Numbers of questions (reference and technical) answered Quantity of down time due to equipment malfunction Numbers of unmet Infopod reservation requests Numbers of faculty contacted with publicity about the InfoPod option Numbers of student questions answered immediately (without referral to other service areas)