STRATEGIES FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INFORMATION COMMONS AT AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, ZARIA, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the strategies involved in the implementation of information commons (ICs) in Ahmadu Bello University library, Zaria in Kaduna State of Nigeria. In this qualitative study, interviews and documentation analysis were performed as the key means of obtaining information. The population for the study consisted of fifteen staff members of Kashim Ibrahim Library of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Eight staff members were appropriately interviewed and documentary sources were also examined. The study revealed that need assessment, well-articulated arrangement in pre-planning, forming team of experts, space consideration, clearly defined working document, and varieties of information resources in all formats as well as a conducive atmosphere and cozy seats and sitting arrangements were some of the basic requirements in the implementation of information commons. It is, therefore, concluded that Ahmadu Bello University Information Commons has met most of the requirements in its implementation. However, it is recommended that a vision statement that align with the vision and mission of the Institution should be crafted and endorsed by all collaborating units and the intended users should be involved in the process of implementing ICs. The paper recommends formulation of articulated policies that aligns with the mission and vision of the institution.

Keywords: Information Commons, Learning Commons, Ahmadu Bello University Library, Zaria, Implementation Strategies

1. Introduction

Electronic resources have become an important and prominent part of library collections in almost all academic libraries globally; this is due to the rapid development of the Internet and the World Wide Web. The fundamental structure and organisation of university libraries’ services have been impacted by patron’s demands for accessibility to such resources. Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Library would not be different. Some academic institutions particularly in advance countries like United States of America, British, Germany, China and some African countries like South Africa, have responded by establishing areas in university libraries, or elsewhere on campus, that are often described as “information commons.” Although definitions of an information commons vary somewhat, it is generally a specific location designated to deliver electronic resources for research and production that is maintained by technically proficient staff, Beagle (1999). Kashim Ibrahim Library, like other academic libraries nationwide, is committed to meeting the challenges raises by information technology through the provision of ready access to electronic and other resources, spaces, facilities and technical assistance that are critical to the research process for students, staff and faculty members.
There is need to make some clarification about major trends in higher education that play a vital role in necessitating the changes in the entire library and librarian activities, and how their community uses the library resource in the Academic institutions, university in particular. Academic libraries have faced unprecedented changes in about two decades back, because of advances in the information technologies available to students and faculty in the nation’s higher educational institutions. As supported by Beverley (1995) who states that, “pervasiveness of information technology is transforming the forms and methods of instruction which requires people in academic life to rethink the way they do their work. He also stressed that libraries have traditionally been responsible for acquiring, organizing, disseminating, and preserving information. Digital technologies now dramatically affect how librarians perform those activities and how students and faculty use library resources. Major information technology trends affecting libraries and all other segments of higher education include dramatically increasing rates of:

1. Personal computer use for research and writing, in homes and offices, by students, staff, and faculty
2. Internet use for research by students, staff, and faculty
3. Emphasis on student, staff, and faculty computer literacy skills
4. Administrative concerns about coordinating computer resources and services throughout campuses
5. Integration of information technologies into classroom instruction
6. Distance education programs because of significant changes in student characteristics, needs, and expectations
7. Student reliance on information technology for study, research and dissemination with concurrent expectations about its widespread availability both on and off campus etc. Beverly (1995)

In this dynamic environment, academic libraries now face enormous changes in user expectations and information-seeking behavior. Library users routinely expect 24 hour seven days per week online access to library resources, including collections, databases, electronic full text sources, and a variety of other library services. In view of the above dynamism in the librarianship due to emerging technology and changing practices, implementing standard information commons would no doubt resolved most of the challenges faced in services delivery, especially to the present day library users.

2. Research Objective
To identify the strategies adopted in the Implementation of Information Commons in Ahmadu Bello University Library, Zaria.

3. Statement of the Problem
The rapid increase in the Internet usage and the availability of an ever growing array of information technology materials have created a paradigm shift in the manner at which Libraries operate. To address this paradigm shift, libraries have been forced to develop and implement extensive physical renovations which can largely fit with the changing nature of intellectual work of the digital age. However, the renovation is directly relevant to the development of information commons as it is observed by the researcher, that many libraries in Nigeria such as University of Sokoto, University of Jos, University of Nigeria Nsuka, University of Benin, and others Bennett S. (2003), operate different types of public access computers with the notion of information commons, but in essence, it is not in line with the standard Information Commons. It is against this background that the researcher intends to study the strategies for the implementation of
information commons (ICs) in Ahmadu Bello University, Library Zaria. The outcome of the study would serve as a guide in the implementation of standard Information Commons in future, particularly the University Libraries.

4.0 Literature Review

Implementation, inevitably takes different shapes and forms in different cultures and institutional settings. Implementation literally means carrying out, accomplishing, fulfilling, producing or completing a given task. Implementation can be seen as what develops between the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of institution or organization to do something or stop doing something and the ultimate impact of the implemented project. More concisely, O’Toole (2003), mentions that Implementation refers to the connection between the expression of institutional intention and actual result. Implementation also refers to the process of preparation, installation, integration, system testing and training. This author basically defines the concept of implementation from the angle of the information system. However as a process, implementation of Information Commons involves the following steps; Pre-planning, forming the team, producing the planning document, spaces/location, assessment plan, policy formulation, other resources, and staffing Michael, (2001).

4.1 Pre-planning Phase

In the pre-planning phase, there should be careful considerations in terms of finance and administrative issues as support for the commons needs to be obtained, particularly from groups of stake holders such as library employees, library administrators, students, and faculty as well as campus administrators. This is because the financial strength, political will and other reasons necessary for the implementation of an information commons may varies from one institution to another. Once the decision has been made, continued support from all of these groups is vital as well. In addition to getting student support and input, it is imperative that campus administrators support the effort to develop a commons. This task becomes easier when “both the library and university administration agree that a library is the focal point of the university’s intellectual life” Holmes-Wong, (1997). The plan for the commons should always conform to the mission, vision and values of the university. This will bring buy-in from the campus administrators.

Before beginning the intense planning phase of an information commons, a local needs assessment should be completed. This assessment will not only inform the decision of whether a commons should be implemented, but will also help guide the planning process and implementation. The result of the assessment and subsequent evaluations will be used to determine the necessity and viability of creating a commons. The needs assessment could be as simple as listening to users’ wants (complaints) or the assessment could escalate to a complete assessment of the library. Stuart, (2008). , also suggested that, Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Learning Space Pre-Programming Tool Kit is an excellent resource for any group wanting to investigate and study the feasibility of an information commons.

A needs assessment can be completed using many of the same evaluation/assessment methods that should continue to be used after implementation. Some of these methods are surveys and comments, focus groups, student and faculty advisory groups or survey tours, to name only a few Stuart, (2008). After evaluating the needs assessment, the services and space requirements for the commons should become evident. Each component or service suggested by the needs assessment should be considered equally and be evaluated for feasibility and desirability, based on the goals and mission of the library and the university.
4.2 Forming the Team
Pre-assessment and planning should be managed by a small team or group. It should be comprised of personnel capable of conducting and evaluating the needs assessment, and of proposing an implementation plan. Each team member must understand the results of the needs assessment within the context of the university and library mission and vision. With this understanding, decisions will be made with patrons need in mind. Providing a space that is useful and usable by the constituency should always be the central desire guiding the team. The group should include representatives of those who have a stake in the outcome of the commons. The group’s composition will be different for each library and will depend on the political climate, campus hierarchy and the scope of the information commons (i.e. room remodel or new building construction Micheal, (2001). As a part of the investigation into a commons, not only should its viability be ascertained, but also what components and services the commons should contain. Some of the possible components of commons include: group study spaces, study rooms, multimedia stations or lab, café, personal assistance, and printing/copying capabilities. Because the space should be customized to the needs of the particular community, no two commons are identical: each implementation of a commons is different from all the others Stuart, (2008).

As the team investigates components to include in the commons plan, it is worth the time and effort to investigate what other institutions have done in their planning process. Consult documents such as the “Information Commons Planning Checklist,” In this regards, following standard information commons planning check list has become so important in the team formation process.

4.3 A well planning document
The planning document is the most important product of the planning team. This document will largely determine the success of the information commons implementation. It is for this reason that, when possible, planning documents should be obtained from other institutions which have successfully implemented a commons. Looking at the experiences of others will help facilitate brainstorming as well as the overall document creation process. Build phasing is another important element in the planning document process. This is because of the frequent changes in technology and in the group of people that the commons may serve. An example of phasing in information commons can be found at Georgia Tech. The overall planning document consisted of three stages and at each stage a lesson might be learned which could be applied to subsequent phase Micheal (2001)

The conveniences that can be provided to students in the commons, is to create a one-stop-shop of services. The fewer points of service available, the happier the student will be when leaving the library. Traditionally library services have been much siloed, working independently from one another. However, in many institutions, as reference statistics are in a downward trend and depressed financial situation many institutions are experiencing, it has becomes so important to combine various public services in to consideration. Possible inclusions in such a meta-services could be circulation, reserve, reference (knowledge discovery systems), and media services. In addition to library services, other campus services such as the writing center, tutoring, etc., should be considered for inclusion into the one-stop-shop commons Micheal.

4.4 Spaces/ Site
It is important to carefully consider the space the commons will occupy, if a new library building is being constructed. Some of the space requirements that need to be considered for a commons in the planning of the building include; space for small group study, large group discussion area, a conference center, multi-media centers, presentation section etc. for example, Utah State
University, University of Southern California, and University of KwaZulu Natal adopted same strategy in terms of space requirement. In cases where a commons will be implemented in an existing building the space needs to be large enough to provide for all of the desired services.

In addition, a plan for scaling or phasing needs to be in place. If the new building will be dedicated to the information commons the planning process will be much different, from when it would be sited in an existing library building. When information commons are discussed most people think of them as being located in a library. However, these spaces might conceivably be located elsewhere-in, for instance, a student center Bennett9. Because libraries provide much of the essence of information retrieval, creation and dissemination they make ideal locations for information commons. However, adequate services may be implemented elsewhere.

Academic libraries have traditionally been quiet spaces for study and contemplation, but that has changed. Students who frequently visit the library are using the space for more group work than individual study. Because of this and the change in class pedagogy, collaboration has become an integral part of a contemporary higher institution learning process. With the advent of online social networks, online collaboration is the most widely used form, but in-person collaboration remains important for social development. Information commons should be comfortable and adaptable to the needs of the user. For example, individuals who prefer to study where there is a constant hum of activity often uses these group spaces.

Despite the need for group spaces in a library, it is still essential to have some spaces set aside elsewhere in the library for individual quiet study. Be creative with technology-free environments, which are spaces not only free of talking, but also free of the quiet hum of computers and ringing of cell phones. Areas with little or no cell phone reception should be considered for this type of space. This speaks to the flexibility and adaptability of the library in meeting the needs of users with a variety of personalities and study styles. In addition, ensure provision of space for as many as possible category of users this may be by asking the users which spaces are most important.

Information commons have largely been developed with undergraduates in mind. While this is laudable, and perhaps preferred, graduate students and faculty should be considered in developing library space because their needs are typically different from the needs of undergraduates. A space set aside for, and marketed to, graduate students and faculty should be considered if they do not feel comfortable in, or their needs are not being met by the existing commons space.

It is hard to discuss library spaces without mentioning the use of the virtual space. Virtual commons encourage collaborative relationships in the development of class work or group projects. Virtual commons have not been adequately explored yet, but with the reliance of students on the online environment, they will become more used and useful to the student. The Georgia Institute of Technology has created a virtual design laboratory for students to vote on emerging concepts and provide narrative feedback. In summary, consider space types, service components, and the needs of all the library constituents. Ensure flexibility into the space with moveable furniture and a variety of services. Doing so will allow users to create personalized space.

4.5 Assessment
As a commons is planned and implemented, the need to incorporate the means of measuring the effectiveness of the library design and evaluating the impacts of decisions made in the programming phase must be addressed. Post-implementation evaluation and assessment is an ongoing process that will continue to inform decisions regarding improvements or phases in the process. Results of such assessments frequently bring to light new and important questions, which
can then be integrated into the design process. Hassanzadeh, M., Rezaei, S.S. and Derakhshan, M., (2010)

The space planning toolkit developed by Crit Stuart for the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) is available on: http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/planning-a-learning-space-tool-kit.pdf. This web site contains examples of assessments procedures that can be used to evaluate the implementation of an information commons. Many university library information commons apply it and ascertain its effectiveness such as Georgia Tech used many of the suggestions in the toolkit and in addition used their Library Student Advisory Council, as a source for information and assistance in implementing the assessments.

These assessments procedure will help find components that stakeholders or users of the space want to see implemented. Vetting ideas through these groups can happen through surveys, focus groups and a sandbox Fox & Stuart, (2003). A sandbox, or test space, is ideal for investigating furniture or other services that are tied to a space. Each of these and others can be important in assessing how service oriented information commons really is. Creating an initial assessment plan should be part of the charge for the investigation and planning team Bennett9.

4.6 Policies/Rules
Clear policies and guidelines need to be in place so that students know what options exist in the space and the rules for using it. Policies regarding noise, computer usage (in the case of a technology-free zone), and cell phone use and group space should be clearly defined and adequately displayed throughout the library Fox & Stuart12 Many libraries have modified their policies to allow food in the commons space or throughout the library, this response to the user’s request has become a great success in many libraries. The By George café at the Odegaard Undergraduate Library at the University of Washington is an example. It was implemented in a library space near the entrance that had become less important for library work and study.

4.7 Staffing
Staffing the commons will depend largely on the services that are provided in the space. Most commons implementations provide at least basic computer support and reference services. Another aspect of staffing is management. Should the manager be a librarian, or a support staff person? Regardless of the answer, the manager must understand the capability of all the technology that is supported by the commons. This does not mean that the manager should know how to do everything, but that the manager knows what the technology is there for. A deep understanding of the purpose or mission of the commons is essential in providing the best service possible. This includes understanding other services that may share the commons space, such as a writing center satellite, publication lab, or academic advising, but which will not necessarily be supported by the commons staff.

Another essential aspect of staffing is the training program that is implemented for commons staff. Again, depending on the services provided in the commons, the training needs to be pertinent. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of training staff to work in an information commons is the rapid pace of change in technology. “Training must keep pace with technology changes and system upgrades. Adequate training can involve a great deal of time and money, which are often in short supply” in many libraries MacWhinnie, (2003). Inadequate training can result in inferior service and loss of good will toward the library. In addition to training on the technology available in the commons, continuous training and practice in customer service skills is necessary.
Finally, a decision will need to be made regarding the composition of the team working in the public space (on a desk or otherwise). What mix of students, support staff and/or librarians will there be in the commons? What level of expertise will be expected of each staff level? Some patrons tend to more easily approach student workers than support staff or librarians.

5. Methodology
The study adopted qualitative research method. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world. Others emphasize an epistemological stance. However, phenomenology research design was adopted for the study. A phenomenological research study is a design that attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a particular situation (or phenomenon). The choice of the methodology was informed based on its appropriateness, as the research design would guide the work to yield a useful result that would assist in knowledge creation. It was also found more appropriate because the population of the study is relatively small, and the data collected are through the interview and documentary sources. Van Manen (1990) stated that Small samples (probably not more than 10 participants) are most suitable for a type of research in which the data collection tools consist of interviews/speech, diaries/write, drawings/non-verbal and observation/visual. Hence, the instruments used in data collection were consultation of documentary sources: some of the sources were in video format, observation of pictures, semi-structured, unstructured interviews and digital recorder used in recording the interview process. The population of this study comprise of the Kashim Ibraham Library MacArthur project committee members. The total number of the committee members was fifteen people (15) who were drawn from various units of the library across various cadre, such as high level management staff, ICT division staff and supporting staff of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Library. The reason behind their selection is that, they received special training about the project (development and Implementation of Information commons).since the population is very small no sampling was employed.

6. Findings
Base on the documentary sources examined, it is evident that, the basic strategies for the implementation of Information Commons in academic institution involved the following processes; pre-planning stage, forming the team of expert or task force stage to Marshall the project, producing the planning document stage, spaces/location determining stage, conducting assessment plan stage, policies formulation stage, and determining the other resources to be available, as well as the staffing issues Micheal, (2001).

In the pre planning stage, support for the commons needs to be obtained, particularly from groups of stake holders such as library employees, library administrators, students, and faculty as well as campus administrators. This is because of the financial, political or other reasons necessary, hence the implementation of an information commons should be carefully planned. Similarly, Holmes-Wong, (1997) clarifies that this task will become easier when both the library and university management agree that a library is the focal point of the university’s intellectual life.

In a similar expression by Micheal, (2001) particularly in the area of forming a task force team, who stated that, Pre-assessment and planning should be managed by a small team or group. It should be comprised of personnel capable of conducting and evaluating the needs assessment, and of proposing an implementation plan. In this regards, Micheal, (2001) further opined that, each team member must understand the results of the needs assessment within the context of the university and library mission as well as vision. With such clear understanding, decisions will be made with patrons and services in mind. Providing a space that is useful and usable by the
constituency should be the central desire guiding the team. In the same vein, the group should include representatives of all the stakeholders who will have hands in the outcome of the commons. Therefore, the group’s composition will be different for each library and will depend on the political climate, campus hierarchy and the scope of the information commons (i.e. room remodel or new building construction).

In the area of location or space to site the information commons, some literature reveals that, it is important to carefully consider the space the commons will occupy. If a new library building is being constructed, a commons needs to be considered in the planning of that building. In cases where a commons will be implemented in an existing building (e.g. University of Utah, University of North Carolina—Charlotte), the space needs to be large enough to provide for all of the desired services. In addition, a plan for scaling or phasing needs to be in place, if the new building will be dedicated to the information commons, the planning process will be much different Micheal, (2001)

Bennett (2003) stated that, whenever information commons are discussed most people think of them as being located in a library. However, these spaces might conceivably be located elsewhere, for instance, a student center. Because libraries provide much of the essence of information retrieval, creation and dissemination, they make ideal locations for information commons. However, adequate services may be implemented elsewhere.

Lastly, need assessment is another important phase of the strategies for the implementation of information commons. Foster & Gibbon (2007), reported a University of Rochester study on need assessment as an excellent example. The study addressed issues regarding campus faculty, students and librarians as well as library facilities, schedules, collections, etc. While it is highly recommended to review this study and use the results to help informed decisions, but assessment should be done at each individual institution, as every institution is unique. Stuart (2008), also suggests that Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Learning Space Pre-Programming Tool Kit, is an excellent resource for any group interested to investigate and study the feasibility of an information commons.

The researcher sought the opinion of the respondents on the strategies to be adopted in the Implementation of Information Commons in Ahmadu Bello University, Library Zaria.

there is need for a need assessment, now we already know our strength, that, it is essential to have it, now what is missing may be trying to get the views of our users, maybe there is need by the library to get in contact with those meant to serve, to hear their views so that at the end of the day, the whole thing will not be a one man show, whereby we have the information commons and not serving its purpose. If that can be done, it will go a long way of helping in development of ICs. (Male Staff Interview, 2016).

As I said, or probably you may want to say that an information commons supposed to be unique itself, in the sense that all resources especially information resources have to be available for easy access and use, so that one will expect that under normal circumstance, there should be enough information resources in all formats.. The facilities should be cosy, the reading chairs have to be very neat and clean and one thing is that, it should be properly ventilated. The sitting arrangement should be very ok, and comfortable. Then probably if you can afford you may have some provisions for entertainment, water, minerals drinks, so that when one is there, he does not necessarily have to go out looking for one thing or the others. (Male Staff Interview, 2016)
The same respondent also stated that, in terms of resources internet connectivity, audiovisual materials, projector, are very important, so that customers can easily have access to the document. There should be room for keeping other networks resources so that whatever is required by the users whether within or outside the library one can easily get it. We should also have periodicals like newspapers, and also other reference material, (Male Staff Interview, 2016).

In view of the fact that, it may not be necessarily a large environment because there are two approaches to it, you either create it within the library or carved it out as an extension. Where you excite in the library that is to show that, the accommodation will be limited, in that respect what is most encouraging is to go for digitize document either newspaper or magazine provided you have your computers and there should be a small place for a group discussion, meeting, one-on-one interaction and there could be audiovisual, there could be head phone, so that whoever want to listing to any lectures or any particular programmes, so, he can use his earphone without having to disturbing the next person that also mean to use it, there should be a television, a clear screen, and multimedia facilities (Female Staff)

The above assertion was supported by another respondent, where he made mention that:

Initially we were thinking of erecting a new structure for that project, but after some deliberations and the availability of space it was agreed to have it within the library,(Male, Staff).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Information Commons in academic libraries are normally developed in order to facilitate and improves the teaching, learning and research goals of the parent institution, often through an integrated and collaborative service model. The Information commons in ABU Zaria, Library should be a central, integrated facility that provides space, technology and professional expertise needed to support the academic use of information resources and technology. It should also assist in transforming the library facilities and services which will enable the library system to be re-structured and re-focused the library mission that will tally with the contemporary mode of operations. This would enable the institution to be the leader among the rest of the Universities in Nigeria, and be among its pairs globally, as enshrined in its vision by creating an enabling and conducive environment for research and learning.

Based on the research findings the some recommendations were made. A vision statement that tally with the vision and mission of the Institution should be crafted and endorsed by all participated units in the implementation of the Library Learning commons. The intended users should be involved in the process of the implementation of ICs. This is to ensure that, the goals of the commons are achieve. Well-articulated policies that align with the main mission and vision of the institution should be formulated.

8. Reference


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