Column: Innovation in Libraries

Come Together, Right Now, Virtually

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a driving force for academic libraries to reexamine how they provide services and support to their communities. This was certainly the case at my academic branch library, where we were also preparing for a major construction project that was slated to begin during the Fall 2020 semester. The combination of these two circumstances complicated the question of how to engage students safely and effectively when the library was more inaccessible than ever before. In order to meet students where they were, I collaborated with the Coordinator for Student Life and Diversity, a member of the Dean's Office, to develop a virtual learning commons that supports intellectual, social, physical, and mental wellbeing. This column will explore the process of creating the Virtual Learning Commons and provide reflections for how this tool has become a necessary component of the student experience.

KEYWORDS

Academic libraries, virtual learning commons, whole-person librarianship, wellbeing

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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, universities and their academic libraries shut their physical doors and made a rapid transition to supporting virtual learning. Many departments across universities struggled to adapt in this new environment, but arguably academic libraries were more equipped to respond to this challenge. Academic libraries invest an impressive amount of their annual budgets on e-books, databases, and streaming media. Plus, research assistance has been available online for many libraries for over a decade. With the foundation of our services being available online, there was a world of possibilities for innovating how to support teaching, learning, and research beyond the normal means; yet, the question of how to support other aspects of the student experience and wellbeing were more difficult to meet. This was certainly the case for me, as I was also strategizing how to best engage students throughout a major construction project taking place in front of my library when the pandemic hit.

In this column I will explore the concepts from library and information science literature that informed the ideation stages of what would become the Herbert Virtual Learning Commons (HVLC), the partnerships with departmental faculty staff and students that informed creation of the HVLC, the process of launching such a tool in the middle of a semester, and reflections and lessons learned that guide the future of the Herbert Virtual Learning Commons.

Select Literature Review

Whole-Person Librarianship and Wellbeing

The concept of whole-person librarianship, coined by Sarah Zettervall (n.d.), is rooted in the idea of holistically serving patrons' needs. Academic libraries have grown to understand that their users seek out the library as a method of connection to a broader array of resources from throughout their institution. Often, the services and spaces in academic libraries are intentionally created to support multiple dimensions of their wellbeing. For this column, I will refer to Bill Hettler's (1976) definition of wellbeing, which encompasses six dimensions of one's identity: emotional, occupational, physical, social, intellectual, and spiritual aspects.

Examples in the literature show that academic Libraries, while often not labeling their work as "whole-person librarianship," have existing programs and services that support different dimensions of their students' experience. For example, Hinchcliffe and Wong (2010) note that designing services and spaces with wellness in mind "puts students at the center of considerations about what programs to offer rather than the library's information resources and services" (p. 221). In doing this, students are active agents in their development and growth. They determine what library services and spaces will best support their needs and see the library as invested in their success.

Throughout the literature, there are examples of academic libraries becoming more involved in supporting different dimensions of students' wellness through the intentional planning and implementation of events and services. For example, many academic libraries

have programs and services that support emotional wellness, such as events during final exams that are meant to relieve stress. Likewise, leisure reading collections have become a popular service that supports literacy and relaxation (Diers & Simpson, 2012; Smith & Young, 2008). In addition, creating themed book displays can grow their intellectual wellbeing by introducing students to new worldviews, ideas, and cultures (Maloney, 2012). Even providing resources for students to research their prospective careers supports their occupational wellness (Pun & Kubo, 2017).

A library's space also plays a key role in supporting different dimensions of wellness. Active learning spaces ensure that students do not have to sacrifice their physical wellness to thrive academically (Clement et al., 2018). Recognizing the library as a gathering spot for students has influenced how spaces are designed to support social wellness in providing a variety of formal and informal study spaces (Allen et al., 2010; Kane & Mahoney, 2020). Students may even use academic libraries as a space to support their spiritual wellness by using the space for quiet contemplation, meditation, or even prayer (Riehman-Murphy & Mross, 2019).

Information and Learning Commons

As noted in the previous section, there are many examples throughout the literature of how academic libraries have adapted their services, spaces, and programs to dynamically support the student experience; however, the second concept that proved most beneficial to my work with the Herbert Virtual Learning Commons was the information and learning commons model (Beagle, 1999). Donald Beagle (1999) explored the model of the information commons, noting the need for academic libraries to consider how to adapt traditionally physical services and spaces to more hybrid environments as more key library services were beginning to move online. Beagle saw the information commons model as a necessary step in supporting how library users engaged with key service points, such as circulation and reference. Since Beagle's 1999 publication, scholars have revisited the topic of the information common and identified clear distinctions between the information commons and the learning commons. The model of the information commons is more focused on supporting learning by providing services and spaces that combine technology and library service points. In comparison, the learning commons model goes a step further by introducing strategic partnerships and other academic success units and focuses on learning outcomes while also providing meaningful spaces (Beagle, 2006; Bailey and Tierney, 2008).

Since those early conversations in the 2000s, the learning commons has become a staple of many academic libraries. Stuart's 2009 survey of ARL Libraries revealed common characteristics in these learning spaces: spaces that support individual and group study and academic support services such as tutors, technology, and more. In addition, these spaces support the idea of "organized spontaneity," in which there is "a lively and dynamic understanding of revisioning library space; it recognizes the need for modular, flexible

arrangement that easily accommodate impromptu, unrehearsed uses" (Stark & Samson, 2010, p. 261). The idea of designing spaces that anticipates what services and spaces students may need was a guiding force for my work, especially when considering how to replicate this idea in the virtual environment.

Background of the Project

The University of Tennessee (UT) Libraries comprises John C. Hodges Library, located in the middle of the UT campus and home of the majority of the UT Libraries' collection. Hodges Library, the largest of the UT Libraries, has the most diverse set of spaces for the UT community, including a learning commons that hosts many academic support units on campus (UT Libraries, n.d.). My library, the Webster C. Pendergrass Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine Library, located on the west side of the University of Tennessee Knoxville (UTK) campus, is attached to the College of Veterinary Medicine. Pendergrass Library "serves students, faculty, and the public community seeking information and scholarship about or relating to UT's Institute of Agriculture and its colleges: the Herbert College of Agriculture and the College of Veterinary Medicine" (Webster C. Pendergrass Library, n.d., About Webster C. Pendergrass Library section). Pendergrass Library serves as one of the only spaces that provides informal and formal study spaces for the two colleges. Since I was hired in the summer of 2018, many of the academic services that hold satellite spaces in Hodges Library (and main offices in the center of campus) have partnered with Pendergrass to hold another satellite location in the library to provide targeted academic support for UT Institute of Agriculture (UTIA) students.

The focus of pre-pandemic communications and engagements—particularly to students in the Herbert College of Agriculture—was around the idea of Pendergrass Library as a gathering space; but the pandemic was not the only force that would impact student usage of the space. Throughout the 2019–2020 academic year, the Pendergrass Library team was preparing for the start of a major construction project that would take place directly in front of the library. This new space would integrate into the Library's entrance and provide additional, much needed formal and informal learning spaces on the UTIA campus. That being said, the Pendergrass team was greatly worried that students would think that the library was unavailable to them throughout construction. Because of my role in leading undergraduate outreach and engagement efforts for Pendergrass, much of my brainstorming for targeted outreach and engagement to students in the Herbert College of Agriculture had been focused on bringing the library to students. This issue was accentuated and complicated in March 2020 when UTK rapidly moved online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In planning for the 2020–2021 academic year, it was clear: It was time to meet students online.

Process

In the summer of 2020, I was looking forward to the fall. In that time, I became acutely aware that even in a post-pandemic and construction world, it would still be necessary to host a

virtual gathering spot that would support students holistically. It was far too unpredictable to foresee how students would interact on campus or how library usage would be impacted by this new building in front of us. In order to strategize how to best engage with students, I joined forces with Hebert College of Agriculture's Coordinator for Student life and Diversity. We started by developing the idea of a virtual study room, hosted in Zoom, where students could meet in breakout rooms with tutors from the Judith Anderson Herbert Writing Center and subject tutors from the Academic Success Center or Multicultural Student Life. As the idea started to take shape, we recognized that in order for this idea to be viable, we needed student feedback that would inform the logistical planning and give insight as to how our work could support students' social, intellectual, and physical wellbeing.

Towards the end of the summer, we distributed a survey via email to Herbert College of Agriculture undergraduate students that were enrolled in summer courses. This survey asked questions regarding their interest in the virtual study room, the frequency in which the virtual space should be available, and how a virtual study space would be used: for individual study, group study, or to meet with writing- and discipline-specific tutors. Over a two-week time period, we received feedback from 53 respondents. Responses from the survey indicated that students were likely to use a virtual space multiple times throughout the week. While the interest in the service was exciting, there was a lack of consensus of what time in the day would appeal to the most students. A complicating factor to the organization and logistics was that students were more excited by the idea of there being a space to connect with other students than a space to connect with academic departments. There were many suggestions for chat boards, group study sessions, and even opportunities to host student organization meetings. These combined suggestions made me and my collaborator realize that what students needed outweighed what any recurring Zoom sessions could possibly provide. It was in that realization that I had the idea to re-envision the virtual study room as a Google Site that students could access wherever and whenever.

The early fall semester was spent developing the [Herbert Virtual Learning Commons](https://sites.google.com/utk.edu/herbertvlc/)[1]. Adapting the learning commons model, we strived to create a website that fostered organized, spontaneous connection to a variety of campus resources that would support their intellectual, physical, spiritual, and social wellbeing. In thinking holistically about how to serve students, we divided the website into four different categories:

- *Academic Support*: information regarding writing and discipline-specific tutoring, Pendergrass Library, and student success-oriented workshops that were happening around campus.

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[1] Herbert Virtual Learning Commons https://sites.google.com/utk.edu/herbertvlc/

- *Tools for Individual Study*: tutorials, applications, and articles to support student learning and studying; maps and information regarding study spaces on the UTK campus; study music; and frequently used links (examples include Canvas and Zoom).

- *Wellness Resources*: information regarding departments on campus that support student wellness, mindfulness and meditation resources, information specific to the Student Counseling Center, and a stress management guide.

- *Study Groups*: available study groups, resources for study groups (such as suggestions as to where to host study groups and how to organize information), a form where students could feature their study group, and links to the UTK Code of Conduct.

As the website began to take shape, the website and a feedback survey was distributed to students through the Herbert College of Agriculture social media channels, along with student newsletters. In addition, we targeted courses where I had provided instruction over the fall semester because there was goodwill between the instructors and the library. In order to receive additional instructor buy-in, my partner in the project and I visited a weekly whole-college faculty meeting to promote the site and to ask that they share it with their students. In addition to sending out the site, we distributed a soft launch survey to students. In this survey we asked:

- Were students likely to use the site?

- What did they like best about the site?

- What did they like least about the site?

- How easy was it for students to navigate the site?

- What could be improved about the site?

Though there were not a lot of responses to the survey, qualitative feedback showed that many of the students were interested in the site and were excited about its formation. The feedback that students provided indicated that they were excited about the resource, particularly the study groups and the wellness resources. To provide quantitative data on how the site was being used, I registered the HVLC in Google Analytics. At the end, I incorporated feedback from students into making the Virtual Learning Commons more tailored to a Herbert audience.

Finally, as we prepared for finals, we began to launch the study group feature. We developed a survey that asked students what classes they were struggling with, their availability to meet with other students, and if they were interested in being a point of contact for other students interested in joining a study group. As students began to respond, we facilitated introductions through email and shared Zoom login information. In addition, we created an advertisement space on the HVLC that featured the groups. Students who were interested in joining the groups could use their UT credentials to login and see other members of the study

group and their contact information. In the end, we had nine different groups over five disciplines.

Lessons Learned

The process of creating the HVLC was equal parts exciting and foreign. There is not a lot of precedent for these types of spaces, especially in academic libraries. Here are some the lessons that I learned from this process:

- Identify who the target audience is: Though the information mostly would have supported any UT student, the HVLC was targeted specifically to students in the Herbert College of Agriculture. One of the pieces of student feedback I received was that the site needed to look like part of the Herbert websites. That feedback prompted me to add photos from the college as headers, banners, and decorative images. I noticed shortly after making that adjustment that Google Analytics was showing users of the site stayed on the website longer.

- Get buy-in from your partners: I mentioned before that Pendergrass has been a gathering space for other student support services. While many services went online over the 2020–2021 academic year, I reached out to these partnerships and asked what information they would like to add to these pages.

- It is an iterative process: In addition to the multiple changes the site underwent as it was being launched, I updated the HVLC multiple times throughout the year as new information was distributed supporting campus services and operations.

Conclusion

Though born from necessity, I fully expect that the HVLC will continue to grow more traction as it becomes part of the Herbert student experience. Throughout the Spring 2021 semester, the HVLC continued to become a staple in the Herbert College of Agriculture as more instructors began to add the site to their Canvas pages and the college's administration promoted it to their faculty and staff. Since creating the site, multiple departments across the university have learned about the HVLC and have begun to examine how they can employ this model to better support students holistically wherever they are.

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