

QUESTION #17: WHAT ARE SOME SPACE, FURNISHINGS, AND EQUIPMENT CONSIDERATIONS IN THE DESIGN OF THE LAC?

A conversation with Karen Smith

The crucial factor upon which all your decisions will be made is the mission, or purpose, for your learning center. Why is this new LAC being put in place? To respond to faculty's wishes that all students have out-of-class support for their courses? To effect a change in the attrition rate and improve students' long term chances for success by initiating new mechanisms for study? To bolster the skills of marginal students who appear to be unsuccessful in your college's educational pro-

grams? To serve special populations who have been underserved and less successful than the majority? If the mission is focused to a special population or a special need, then the amount of space to be dedicated to the center will be limited as well. On the other hand, if the plan is to serve a large percent of the student body, then the space must be adequate to allow for a variety of activities and easy flow to and from the various services of the LAC.

How do I plan for the best use of my existing space?

Really, a first question to ask yourself is, will the students be required to come to the LAC for specific assistance? If so, remember that required participation will dictate space parameters because you can assume that use of services will be automatic and at peak the day the center is opened and not grow gradually over time.

In addition, consider the various services that will be offered within the facility. Adequate space to allow for classes, computer lab use, open tutoring, and other activities must be accounted for, especially if all activities will operate in unison. If you have classrooms and they are not used during the entire day for classes, then the space can be used for tutoring

during other periods. However, if tutoring needs are extensive, then tutoring will operate all day and a dedicated area will be required exclusive of any available classrooms.

The reason for your LAC—its goals, its mission—will dictate the larger notion of space requirements.

Will I face different problems if I plan a learning assistance center for a designated space versus designing the shape of the space?

If you are given the option to design a new facility for your LAC, you can optimize all aspects of your program. What great fun to be able to do this! If, however, a designated space is to be remodeled for the LAC, you may find yourself facing difficult and surprising constraints. You can, with careful planning and prioritizing, provide for all aspects of the program that you have planned, even in a relatively small area.

In the learning assistance centers that I supervise, we provide the same basic services in each of the five centers. However, the spaces vary greatly from 8,000 to 1,400 square feet. Granted, within the largest facility, more computers are available and the tutoring area is much larger. In addition, this largest center

has a comfortable conference room where workshops and staff meetings can be held. But even the smallest center has computers, learning assistance carrels, and an open tutoring area, as well as offices for the director and learning specialist, a dedicated area for the secretary and learning assistants, an office work area and reception desk.

Although the site allocated for your learning center may not fit your preferences, you can, with careful consideration and planning, place your planned activities in almost any space provided. One must determine what percentage of space will be dedicated to each service of the LAC, and then work within the space allocated. It can be done.

How do I go about determining the specific furnishings for the LAC?

Most likely, by the time that you have delineated the learning center's mission, thought through carefully and planned the use of the dedicated space, the identification of specific furnishings will follow easily. Think about not only functionality but also versatility in making a final decision on furniture. If furniture is

purchased with only one purpose in mind and one place to use it, you lose the option of moving furnishings around as needs may change. On the other hand, some furnishings must be identified for specific purposes. Computer tables are definitely recommended for computers over something like library tables, which

can accommodate tutoring but are awkward and improperly designed for computing use.

Actually, your college may not only provide you with the assistance of an interior designer or consultant but may also dictate the vendors from which you must purchase your furniture. State or college contracts with furniture vendors allow for a maximization of

What other issues should concern me?

Obviously, an inviting atmosphere is crucial to an effective learning assistance center. The learning center should be very open and friendly. We want our students to be eager to use our services, and they are often initially shy about seeking assistance for something that they perceive others not needing. Lots of windows, if possible, and open working areas encourage even the most reticent student to see and be seen as one of many students “doing what comes naturally.”

I personally have a strong negative attitude about any learning assistance center facility that uses a medical model. Such a facility provides a series of closed-door areas much too similar to the doctor’s examining room

In identifying necessary equipment, do guidelines exist for making my decisions?

I must begin an answer to this question by referring you back to the mission or purpose for your learning assistance center, for from that you will determine the kinds of equipment that will be needed to provide the ser-

vice of your center. Your college may provide very strict parameters for the vendors that you use for purchases, or it may provide only guidelines, and you must make the decisions. In addition, the CAS Standards for Learning

funds for the purchase of furniture, office equipment such as phones, fax machines, and often computers, printers, and copiers as well. If a consultant is available to you, be sure that you explain the goals and philosophy of your service carefully, because a consultant who has not been involved in designing for a program like a learning center will need close collaboration with you in making the right selections.

where you learn about your affliction—or academic problem—and may be given a prescription for a remedy—guidance and assistance. If we want our students to feel secure and welcome in seeking learning assistance, then the facility must reflect that attitude and ambiance.

Another serious concern is accessibility for anyone needing special accommodations. In all likelihood, your college will have an individual who is responsible for monitoring for ADA and Section 504 compliance and can assist you in this area. However, you must be cognizant of how students with special needs will access the learning assistance center services and plan for their needs.

ences of your center. Your college may provide very strict parameters for the vendors that you use for purchases, or it may provide only guidelines, and you must make the decisions. In addition, the CAS Standards for Learning

Assistance Programs contains a section on facilities and equipment among its 13 sections, and this may be beneficial to you as a guide.

I remember the confusion and bafflement that I experienced when first trying to determine which kinds of projectors, or tape players I should purchase for my new learning assistance center. The university was willing to

offer catalogs for my use, but I found that I was really on my own in the final decision. So, I began to use the small network of colleagues in other learning centers and asked for their sage advice. On the whole, my decisions turned out to be wise and the equipment served us well and assisted the staff in delivering the services that we had promised in our mission.

How will I know now what will be needed in the future?

Well, you are now planning for the present and much of your plans will be based on a "good faith" use of space. In other words, you may have much documentation of academic needs and great ideas for providing services to accommodate and resolve these needs, but you can never be certain of the expediency of your plans until the students walk through the doors. And, likewise, you cannot know today exactly how the use of services may grow and expand.

But, and this is important, you were hired for the position and given the responsibility for making the decisions, so your good judgment is important. Again, call on your colleagues who have been in this field for some time and ask good questions about program growth and expansion. Did their centers ex-

perience a natural growth, slowly and incrementally over the years? Or was there a sudden discovery of the learning assistance center by the students in the second or third year, which brought about a surge of users? Did your colleagues experience program growth due to program expansion or an assignment of a new service to the learning assistance center?

In addition, study the student population in your college and use the information about their characteristics in making your decisions. Ask your dean or institutional research director for student information that can provide an indication—really only a clue—about how your students will access a new service, and how likely they are to respond to academic support.

So, are you saying that I should plan for a lot of growth in the use of my center's services?

Sure, don't you expect an increase in use each year? I'm really suggesting that if the space is adequate for meeting the initial needs

of your planned activities, and there is space for which you cannot now conceive a use—keep it and develop a flexible-use plan. Re-

member the old adage, "Your possessions will grow to fill your cupboards and closets?" This is an excellent time to protect space and allow for its unexpected or not-yet-planned use.

But, above all, have fun in designing your center. This is your big opportunity to live out some of your dreams for a learning assistance center, and you will want to capitalize on as many as possible now.

ADDITIONAL READINGS

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