TRANSFORMING LIBRARY SERVICE THROUGH INFORMATION COMMONS

Case Studies for the Digital Age

D. Russell Bailey and Barbara Gunter Tierney

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Do libraries innovate? This was the topic of the Library and Information Technology Association’s Ultimate Debate program at the ALA 2007 annual conference. The panelists discussed stirrings of innovation at the grassroots level, the problem of diffusion of innovation across the library community, and the need for a “sandbox” where innovative ideas can be tested.

The book you are reading makes a strong case for the information commons as an example of library innovation (in staffing, in scope of service delivery, and in the library’s stance toward the user) and also of diffusion. In *Transforming Library Service through Information Commons*, Russell Bailey and Barbara Tierney demonstrate how a surprising variety of institutions have effectively rolled out this exciting model that blends new technologies and human expertise across newly reconfigured spaces to better help the library user in pursuit of learning. The reader encounters herein such a range of information commons, across such a broad geographic swath, that we must pause to remember that the whole movement started only some twenty years ago.

Bailey and Tierney also are contributing authors to *The Information Commons Handbook* (2006), but the present book is not its stepchild. Where the *Handbook* thematically explores the historical and institutional contexts of IC planning, implementation, and assessment, this book follows the evidentiary trail of successful commons development through a well-presented set of case studies. Nor should this book be seen as just another in the long series of ruminations about “learning spaces” or “the library as place.” Rather, this book is about the substance that goes into a commons space. No one doubts that an IC project could be hobbled by a poorly designed physical layout. But the great variety of successful IC floor plans (round spaces, square spaces, angular spaces, diffuse spaces) argues that substance trumps space. There is clearly no single ideal IC
spatial configuration. But within the great variety of divergent IC spaces, there does appear to be a convergent paradigm of IC substance. That substance is delineated in this book.

In her probing review of The Information Commons Handbook, Cees-Jan de Jong comments: “The Information Commons is a product of many integrated factors, individual to each institution, which makes it difficult to present a single description.” This is precisely the great advantage of the multiple case study approach taken in this volume. The reader can see how the convergent paradigm of IC substance plays out across this variety of institutional environments. And then the reader can better appreciate the significant “lessons learned” offered by those who staff, manage, and evaluate those information commons for their respective libraries. The lessons learned may vary in some details, but common themes do emerge, and in the aggregate they convey the broader realization that the information commons is an expression of this particular period in history when two great long-term eras—the Age of Print and the Digital Age—are grinding against each other like huge tectonic plates. And it also is quickly becoming an expression of our views of the future, for as Robert A. Seal has noted, “The IC continues to evolve, as it must, in response to changes in user needs and expectations, technology, pedagogy, and society.” It would seem, then, that the information commons also may be a plausible candidate for the “sandbox” desired by those LITA panelists mentioned at the outset, especially when managed in collaboration with faculty development and IT/pedagogical initiatives.

I therefore congratulate Russell Bailey and Barbara Tierney for producing a well-conceived and thoroughly researched monograph, applaud ALA for publishing a book that meets a timely need across the profession, and welcome the reader to the innovative substance of Transforming Library Service through Information Commons.

—Donald Beagle

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Change is a constant in libraries, and the tide of technology innovation rises without ebb. The commons—information, learning, research, and teaching—embodies and nourishes this culture of change, making it imperative that we library and information professionals not only accept but also embrace change and innovation. It is also necessary that we prudently plan, design, and shepherd effective change in resources and services, that we train and educate ourselves and colleagues to lead, guide, and thrive in this culture of change and innovation. In so doing, we not only provide the most effective and influential resources and services for our patrons but, more important, bequeath this natural propensity to productive change as our professional legacy to students, colleagues, and patrons.

Although many of our patrons are “digital natives” of the “digital tribe” (also known as the Net Generation, millennials, or neo-millennials), most library and information professionals are “digital immigrants.”1 We were not “born digital” but have become digital, have immigrated into the digital realm. As digital immigrants, we are well equipped to guide our patrons in both digital and nondigital realms as well as all areas in between—this, too, is part of our legacy.

This volume of case studies was conceived and produced as a gateway to resources that assist and facilitate the professional’s work in designing and manifesting effective change in facilities, informational resources, services, and staff. It is intended for several vested groups:

- library, information, and other institutional administrators who are planning strategically and tactically how to improve library services
- library and information staff who are determined to energize and improve their library and information enterprises