

## **Chapter 10**

# **Common Ground: UBC Library and Student Development in the Chapman Learning Commons**

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*Many colleges and universities have created learning commons that bring together library, computing, and other campus services to support students' academic work. Mitchell and Bell describe the creation of a learning commons that became not only a place to access academic services, but also a focal point for student leadership and holistic support. Mitchell and Bell show how UBC's work is grounded in student development theory and cuts across traditional unit-based structures to be truly collaborative. The authors also provide advice and reflective questions to guide those who would like to undertake similar collaborations.*

The University of British Columbia (UBC) is a public, multicampus university with more than forty thousand students at its main campus in Vancouver, British Columbia.<sup>1</sup> As a comprehensive, research-intensive university, UBC offers bachelor's through to doctoral degree programs. The Chapman Learning Commons, a branch of UBC Library, is a collaborative learning environment at the UBC Vancouver campus that offers a range of services to support learning, research, writing, and the use of technology. Located in the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, the Chapman Learning Commons provides integrated and coordinated learning support for students across faculties, offering a suite of programs that foster academic success. Since 2001, UBC Library and Student Development have partnered in the delivery of services and programs in the Chapman Learning Commons, shaping a unique campus environment that supports student learning.

The following chapter examines the impact of student development philosophies on the Chapman Learning Commons, with particular emphasis on engaging students as program leaders. The chapter begins with an overview of the historical foundations that shaped the relationship between Student Development and UBC Library and provides details of the collaborative infrastructure. Next is an exploration of the framing models and theories that guide the partnership and the approach to working with students, including Keeling, Underhile, and Wall's concept of horizontal and vertical structures; Astin's Theory of Student Involvement; and Sanford's principle of challenge and support.<sup>2</sup> A discussion of challenges and opportunities in the partnership between Student Development and the library provides strategies and questions

for other institutions to consider around staffing, managing space, and involving students. Ultimately, what guides the collaboration between UBC Library and Student Development is a trust in the expertise that each partner offers and a commitment to investing in student leadership.

## Historical Foundations of Partnership

One of the three oldest buildings on campus, the former main library at the University of British Columbia (now the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre) featured vaulted ceilings, beautiful stained glass windows, and marble floors in the main concourse of the building. In 2000, the once lively concourse of main library sat dormant with rows of dusty card catalogues that were no longer in use. Senior administrators from UBC Library, Student Development, and Information Technology (IT) Services began conversations about how the heritage core of the main library could be reimagined as a dynamic learning space and academic support center for students. At the time, information commons were emerging on campuses across North America and partnerships between libraries and IT departments in these facilities were common.<sup>3</sup> UBC, however, wanted to go beyond the traditional information technology orientation of an information commons and provide a broader focus on learning.

Prompting the collaborative conversations to develop a learning commons on campus were results from two influential documents: the Boyer Commission report *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities* and the Canadian Undergraduate Survey Consortium's (CUSC) *Study of First Year University Students*.<sup>4</sup>

The Boyer Commission report called for a new model of undergraduate education at research universities to address major inadequacies in the quality of education delivered to the undergraduate student population. Of particular relevance to the learning commons environment, the Boyer Commission report emphasizes the creative use of information technology to support learning and the importance of fostering a sense of community for undergraduate students, particularly commuter students.<sup>5</sup> With UBC's large commuter student population, such findings were particularly relevant.

A significant finding from the CUSC report, which surveyed 5,548 first-year students at UBC, was the importance of the first-year student transition to university on their overall success. The survey indicated that some of the key areas adjusting to campus life at UBC were using the library, finding help with questions or problems, getting academic advice, and having a sense of belonging.<sup>6</sup>

The key themes from both reports were highly influential in shaping the program focus for the Chapman Learning Commons. United by the common interest to develop programs and learning support models to address the issues identified in the Boyer Commission and CUSC reports, the idea of a learning commons at UBC was developed and implemented through a collaborative initiative between the library, Student Development, and Information Technology Services. In September 2000, a learning commons proposal was prepared by the University Librarian and Library Development Office, which outlined how UBC's main library could be transformed into an "exciting centre of learning, cultural appreciation and academic discourse."<sup>7</sup> The proposal emphasized peer learning support, technology, tutoring, and the creation of an innovative library environment focused on welcoming and integrating first-year students. This

proposal was presented by the university president to Kay and Lloyd Chapman, who were strong supporters of UBC Library with a history of annual giving dating back to 1975. The Chapmans supported the proposal, providing a gift of one million dollars to support the development of the learning commons. The university agreed to provide matching funds in the form of an endowment, 6 percent of which would be guaranteed and available for annual program support in the learning commons.

In fall 2001, the Chapman Learning Commons Working Group was formed and included representatives from UBC Library, Student Development, and Information Technology Services, a delegate from the UBC Fund Development Office, two undergraduate students, and two graduate students. As reflected by the composition of the working group, it was a priority to involve each partner in the planning process as well as include a strong student voice in decision making. As part of the planning process, responsibilities of the key learning commons partners were collaboratively developed, documented, and posted on the learning commons website.<sup>8</sup>

With funding secured by the Chapmans' generous gift and the collaborative efforts of the working group underway, construction began to transform the central concourse of the main library. On February 18, 2002, only a year and a half after the original proposal for the learning commons was submitted, the Chapman Learning Commons opened its doors.

## Collaborative Infrastructure

UBC Library is one of the largest university libraries in Canada, with over 350 staff members and twenty-one branches/divisions.<sup>9</sup> The campus Student Development unit includes fourteen professional staff who work collaboratively with the library and various faculties across campus to provide academic support, leadership and involvement opportunities, and orientation and transition programming for all students. Common to both the library and Student Development is the important liaison role with faculties and the commitment to support student academic success.

The full-time staff in the Chapman Learning Commons currently includes the coordinator (a librarian), a student affairs professional, and an administrative assistant. A team of fifteen students, ranging from undergraduate to doctoral level, staffs the Learning Commons Help Desk and the team is jointly supervised by the coordinator and student affairs professional. Notably, the student affairs position is jointly funded by UBC Library and Student Development. The primary reporting structure for the student affairs position is to the coordinator of the Chapman Learning Commons, with strong strategic direction from Student Development to ensure the library-based student affairs staff member remains part of a strong community of practice on campus.

The commitment within Student Development to joint training, mentoring, and sharing best practices and current research helps shape effective crossfunctional approaches to supporting students. This approach is evident in the Chapman Learning Commons through coordinated training of staff in both library and student affairs philosophies. The staff of the learning commons also develops interdisciplinary expertise through attendance at both library and student affairs workshops and conferences. This knowledge base helps in guiding daily decision making in the learning commons, working with the team of student assistants, and developing learning-centered programs.

In addition to Student Development and the library, other key partners in the collaborative infrastructure of the Chapman Learning Commons are represented on the Program Advisory Committee and Student Advisory Committee. The Program Advisory Committee consists of staff representatives from UBC Library; Student Development; the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology; the Writing Centre; and the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies. The Student Advisory Committee is comprised of ten students, including students at large, student senators, and other representatives from the undergraduate student government. Both groups meet quarterly and advise learning commons staff on how to best support student learning and help shape strategic directions.

The Chapman Learning Commons is tremendously popular with students, as both a vibrant study space and a place to access essential programs and services. Fundamental to the success of the learning commons is the leadership from student assistants, combined with the expertise of staff from UBC Library and Student Development. Guiding the collaborative efforts are key student development theories that challenge the learning commons to expand the realm of support traditionally emphasized by academic libraries from “cognitive development and scholarly pursuit” to a more holistic approach to student growth and development.<sup>10</sup>

## **Framing Theories and Program Development**

Since the official opening in 2002, the programs and services in the Chapman Learning Commons have grown and continually transformed to meet student needs. The current suite of programs includes (1) learning technology and multimedia support at a central help desk, (2) tutoring in math, physics, economics, and chemistry, (3) writing support, (4) peer academic coaching, (5) learning-focused workshops and events, and (6) access to a variety of technologies. The help desk is staffed by tech-savvy, academically focused student assistants, and there is a strong commitment to referral to other library and student services.

The array of programs and services offered in the Chapman Learning Commons are intentionally shaped and guided by student development theories that address the multiple dimensions of student growth. While there are numerous student development theories applied in the Chapman Learning Commons, three influential models and theories include Keeling, Underhile, and Wall’s concept of horizontal and vertical structures; Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement; and Sanford’s challenge and support principle.<sup>11</sup> There was no formal process of bringing forth each theory and reaching agreement between partners in terms of which models and philosophies would be most relevant. Instead, there is an inherent trust in the expertise of the student affairs professional in the Chapman Learning Commons to bring specialized knowledge in developing student-centered programs to an academic environment.

### **Keeling, Underhile, and Wall’s Horizontal and Vertical Structures**

Current thinking driving approaches to support student learning at UBC and other institutions is to challenge the vertical structures and consider a more horizontal approach. As noted by Keeling, Underhile, and Wall, higher education needs to think about creating horizontal structures to more accurately reflect how students experience the university environment. The shift represents a movement away from silos based on disciplines, schools, departments, or administration to an approach that cuts across these vertical structures, shifting thinking to

concepts like first-year experience, student development, or advising.<sup>12</sup>

The horizontal approach is particularly relevant when considering the benefits of collaborating in a learning commons environment. Library staff, for example, could be working effectively with students with little awareness of initiatives underway in student services or, more importantly, of how partnering with staff in these units might provide stronger resources to students. Similarly, student services staff could be working to support students without considering how they might collaborate with other campus partners to make more accurate referrals and facilitate a more seamless experience for students.<sup>13</sup> Both areas may be providing strong service, but to the student the experience may feel fragmented and disconnected. The vertical approach results in a unit focusing more on the advancement of "internal goals and objectives than on adhering to, elucidating, or accomplishing broader institutional purposes."<sup>14</sup> An intentional effort is made in the learning commons partnership between Student Development and the library to keep each other informed in a timely manner of work happening in other departments and to identify opportunities to collaborate.

When applying this approach to the collaborative decision-making process in the Chapman Learning Commons, a question often asked is, "What makes the most sense for students?" In many cases, what is easiest for each unit may not be the best solution for students, but a joint commitment to authentically listen to student concerns and move beyond unit-based challenges to find solutions will lead to innovative outcomes. By committing to this perspective, the Chapman Learning Commons chooses a horizontal approach in designing programs and services, combining the knowledge and expertise of librarians, student development staff, and student leaders to create a seamless campus environment that supports student growth.

### ***Astin's Theory of Student Involvement***

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement guides practices in the Chapman Learning Commons and is applied to the collaborative decision making around programs and services, as well as how work is approached with students. Of particular relevance in shaping a learning commons environment, Astin notes that "the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program."<sup>15</sup>

The Chapman Learning Commons continually strives to offer a variety of programs to meet student needs and encourage involvement. The majority of programs offered through the Chapman Learning Commons are delivered by trained student staff who provide peer-to-peer assistance. Many workshops are also student-initiated and student-led. Through tutoring, coaching, and other student-led programs, over three hundred involved student leaders are shaping the culture in the Chapman Learning Commons. The diversity of activities, workshops, resources, and learning support programs that result promotes students' "*social inclusion* in a college or university as member of a *community of learning*."<sup>16</sup> [emphasis in original]

Astin's student involvement theory also provides useful guidance when working with the student team at the Chapman Learning Commons Help Desk. The team is jointly supervised by library and student development staff. A strong emphasis is placed on team building and engaging students in their work in a meaningful way. In addition to working shifts on the help desk, student leaders develop programs, participate in committees, and drive the content on the website. Every year, student leaders report the profound impact the position had on their student

experience. In the words of Chapman Learning Commons Assistant Samuel Wempe, a fourth-year student in the Faculty of Arts:

Working as a Learning Commons Assistant has not only made me a better student, it has also brought me closer to my university and enriched my sense of belonging in its community. I have become a transmitter of information about programs, support services and general help the university has to offer to my social network (many who frankly had never considered asking for help) and anyone I see in need of a helping hand around campus.<sup>17</sup>

The knowledge student assistants gain not only benefits the peers they help in the Chapman Learning Commons, but also contributes to their overall academic success and engagement with the campus community. Through effective collaboration, intentional planning, and investing in student leaders, learning commons can facilitate student involvement. According to Astin's theory, "the greater the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development."<sup>18</sup>

### ***Sanford's Challenge and Support***

According to Sanford, optimal learning and development in college results from a balance of challenge and support. He argued that when faced with the tension of the collegiate environment, students are continually trying to restore a sense of equilibrium. If challenged too much, a student may revert to "primitive responses" that have been effective in the past.<sup>19</sup> If challenged too little, the individual may become complacent and fail to develop. In order to promote individual development, an institution must present the student with "strong challenges, appraise accurately his [or her] ability to cope with these challenges and offer him [or her] support when they become overwhelming."<sup>20</sup>

To collaboratively train, mentor, and support the team of student leaders who work in the Chapman Learning Commons, Sanford's theory of balancing challenge and support is particularly valuable. The insight used most frequently in the joint supervision of the student team is the idea of lessening the tension produced by the university environment and providing the support necessary to allow student leaders to succeed. In other instances, it may mean challenging students to push beyond their comfort zone and take on activities that will allow them to develop professionally and personally. The impact of this approach allows for tremendous growth of the team and results in outstanding, student-driven programs and services.

Relevant to Sanford's model, Student Development has mapped out a detailed monthly schedule of the student academic cycle, and this influences the timing of programs and services offered in the Chapman Learning Commons. The cycle can also help supervisors understand the demands a student is experiencing at certain times of the academic year, which can guide decisions around expectations from staff. This does not eliminate the fact that the student assistants have a job to do and need to be accountable, but important skills can be mastered with the understanding of challenge and support. The benefits of applying this concept in the joint supervision of the student staff is a skilled, engaged, and capable team who demonstrate continuous growth, learning to push themselves professionally to achieve the goals of the Chapman Learning Commons.

## Challenges and Opportunities

It is important to emphasize that the pathway to authentic partnership is not always easy—work cultures may vary, approaches to working with students differ, and approval paces or budgeting processes may be out of sync. Due to differences, there may be situations when getting the work done can seem easier without the involvement of partners or students. But it is critical to take the time to understand different work contexts and have open, trusting lines of communication. The results for students will be strengthened by this common understanding. Three key areas of challenge and opportunity in the collaborative partnership between UBC Library and Student Development are staffing, managing space, and involving students.

### Staffing

Over the years, the Chapman Learning Commons has explored several different staffing models, some prompted by changes in organizational structure and others in response to shifts in student needs. Collaboratively shaping and supporting staffing models can present a unique set of challenges, particularly around hiring processes, funding, payroll procedures, and supervision. Based on the experience of Student Development and the UBC Library, some important questions for institutions to consider with respect to staffing a learning commons include these:

- Who will write the job descriptions for both student and staff positions?
- Are the positions funded by one unit or jointly?
- Who is part of the interview process?
- Who does the training and evaluation?
- What library committees should student affairs professionals participate in, and what student affairs committees should librarians be part of?

A greater willingness to work outside of functional frameworks, aligned with Keeling, Underhile, and Wall's horizontal approach, creates a greater understanding of how services can work more effectively together and will have a positive impact on students and staff alike.<sup>21</sup>

### Managing Space

In many cases, the space that houses a learning commons is within a library, and with that can come an inherent set of challenges when partnering with an external unit in the management of programs and services. Although UBC Library is responsible for the space and daily operations of the Chapman Learning Commons, essential to the successful partnership with Student Development is creating a climate of shared ownership and management of the space and its programs. To do so, there is a joint creation of mission, vision, and values as well as greater flexibility and shared development of use policies around the space. Ultimately, student affairs professionals must be more than guests or tenants in the space with the mandate of bringing services in for students. Issues of control and traditional management structures must be examined in order to create student-centered space and a genuine place for student-led initiatives.

In managing space in the learning commons, some questions to consider include these:

- How are shared values reflected?
- How do the mission, vision, and values of the learning commons align with strategic plans of the institution as well as unit areas?
- Who is part of your team to create the shared vision?

Considering these questions and shaping the answers in partnership can provide key direction

when impasses and differences of opinion occur throughout planning, implementation, and evaluation stages.

### ***Involving Students***

A core principle that grounds much of the decision making between UBC Library and Student Development is adopting a student-centered approach. This does not imply simply programming for students or asking them about their needs, but in line with Astin's theory, it means actively involving students in solutions. With a campus filled with bright student minds, the Chapman Learning Commons strives to use every opportunity to engage students in decision-making processes and encourage student-led initiatives. Involving students at this level, however, requires trust in their abilities, a willingness to allow students to drive programs, a commitment to mentoring students, and an acceptance that mistakes will be made along the way.

When operating a branch within a large library system where not all staff members may place the same trust in students, it may be challenging for all student-led initiatives to thrive. There are examples where program ideas were fully supported by all partners in the Chapman Learning Commons; however, when backing was required from larger units, the support was not there. Often the issue is finding the comfortable balance between staff expertise and student peer-led initiatives. Some questions to consider in authentically involving students include these:

- What education can be done with staff around the benefits of peer-led initiatives?
- Is the student voice represented at committee tables?
- What opportunities exist for students to help shape strategic direction?
- What mechanisms exist to get feedback from students?
- What role do students play in program and service delivery?

In order for the partnership between UBC Library and Student Development to be successful and enhance the student experience, it was imperative to understand what is important and valued by each partner, to respect one another's interests, and to work together to find collaborative solutions that benefit all partners involved. Whether the issues considered concern staffing, managing space, or involving students, one partner cannot be seen to have the final say on decisions but instead understand that solutions are reached through a collaborative approach.

## **Conclusion**

Since opening the Chapman Learning Commons at UBC, there has been tremendous growth, change, and innovation. While there have been shifts in the collaborative infrastructure between Student Development and UBC Library, what remains constant is the common goal of supporting and enhancing student learning. Through a crossfunctional approach to training and professional development, student affairs models and theories are deeply ingrained in how learning commons staff work with students and develop programs. Keeling, Underhile, and Wall's model of horizontal and vertical structures; Astin's Theory of Student Involvement; and Sanford's concept of challenge and support are just some of the student development frameworks that guide practices. While the focus of this chapter is these three frameworks, equally important is research exploring the role of colleges and universities in the development of identity that further broaden the understanding of the student experience.<sup>22</sup>

Applying student development theories in the library environment represents a fundamental



shift in perspective from information and resources at the center to students at the center. By offering diverse programs and services for students and also actively involving them in service delivery and program development, one can encourage students to engage with their university community and empower them to shape their academic experience. As noted by UBC's former Vice-President of Students Brian Sullivan, "Students, as individuals and in groups, are not only the recipients of our services but also critical partners in the achievement of institutional goals."<sup>23</sup>

By challenging those dichotomies with collaborative partnerships among librarians, student affairs professionals, and beyond, the Chapman Learning Commons strives to bring together programs and services that address the holistic student experience and meet the call for "new organizational structures in higher education . . . that incorporate innovative learning methods that do not reflect or reinforce the traditional dichotomies of student/academic affairs."<sup>24</sup> The approach requires mutual trust in the expertise that each colleague lends to the process as well as in students' abilities and potential. By letting go of apprehension around control of staffing, space, programs, and services and being flexible about the approach to working with students, creativity and innovation can flourish as the learning commons leverages a campuswide network of knowledge to enhance the student experience.

## Notes

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