

# Learning Commons Focus Group Report

UMass Amherst Libraries  
April 2006  
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## Executive Summary

Focus group meetings and individual interviews about the Learning Commons were conducted with students in April 2006. Three themes were consistently voiced: students liked the study pods area best; they liked the public station area least; and they want more electrical and Ethernet connectivity.

## Introduction

Focus group sessions or individual interviews were held on 4 occasions in April 2006. Learning Commons users were invited to participate in focus group sessions according to a randomly generated time and location chart. The invitations were issued by the Learning Commons staff supervisors and the assessment librarian. A free beverage coupon was given to participants when they signed up for a session and two additional free beverage coupons were given at the time of the session.

The nine participating students included five women, and four men. Students were from all grade levels including two graduate students. Four students live off campus and five live on campus. They come to the Learning Commons an average of five days a week, sometimes multiple times a day. Five of the students come from racially or ethnically diverse backgrounds.

The sessions were facilitated by the assessment librarian and notes were taken by members of the Assessment Committee. Discussion topics included:

- Favorite and least favorite areas of the LC and their attributes;
- Discussion of specific areas including the: study pods, study rooms, public stations, tables, and lounge chairs
- Development of quiet areas
- Development of the courtyard.

The attached Learning Commons map was used as an aid in the discussions. Icons from the map are included in the area summaries provided on the following pages.



**Location: Study Pods**

**What we heard:**

- The study pods were most frequently identified as a favorite LC location
- Students like the pods because of their bigger size. This is #1 reason they are preferred.
  - More “spread out space” at the pods
  - Big enough for a single person to work
- Students like the pods because they are a “semi-private” space.
  - Open but still sectioned off – you can have your own computer but still be sectioned off ... more focused in the pods
- Pods are not as busy as the public computers and often seem more available than public computers.
  - I’ll take two trips around pods, then go to 16 or 7, then come back down looking for a pod... usually one is available by then

**Advantages:**

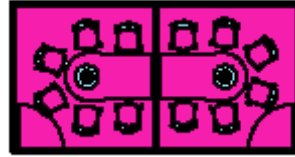
- Plug in a laptop for Ethernet connection
- Plug in for electrical connection
- Authentication provides access to profile/U drive/software/easier printing
- I can sit with someone I know

**Disadvantages:**

- Can be too small for 2 users
- Laptop users may occupy a desktop station for Ethernet connection – eliminating the use of a desktop
- Awkward to share between a laptop user seeking an Ethernet connection and a desktop user
- Lack of access to color printing
- Not enough pods

**Implications:**

- More pods needed
- More places for Ethernet connections needed
- More electrical outlets needed
- Larger workspaces for two needed



**Location:** Study Rooms

**What we heard:**

- Students like having study rooms because they like the collaborative atmosphere.
  - I think they are a great idea – I love them
  - Great place for group work
  - Great to have for Writing Center
  - Students like privacy – the ability to spread out – to go between the computer and the table
  - They have outlets for plugging in laptops – so possible to have more than one computer – love the chairs
  
- The rooms are not soundproof.
  - noise spills over the top
  - people think the rooms are soundproof
  - sound is intensified outside the rooms
  
- Managing the study rooms can be tricky.
  - Hard to get a room
  - Some people are comfortable asking a single user to give up the room for a group – some would prefer someone else ask for them
  - Most single users would willingly give up a room for a group
  - Some people camp out in a room and disappear
  - Writing Center hours often mean that groups have to relinquish a room
  
- They are used by individuals too.
  - I like them because they are quiet, isolated and I can spread out
  - I don't use them because they are saved for groups

**Advantages:**

- Like the whiteboard

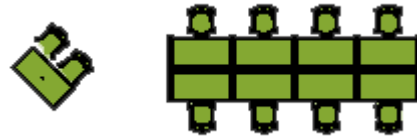
**Disadvantages:**

- Hot
- Not usually available
- Can be messy – but not a food way – crumpled papers – sticky tables
- Sometimes feel like a spectacle
- Room I is reserved for advising but it seems no one is ever in there

- Round tables that were centered in the room would allow more people to fit.

**Implications:**

- Provide more group study spaces
- Improve soundproofing – sound dampening
- Improve ventilation
- Investigate additional/alternative Writing Center options – Make clearer the distinction and use of the Writing Center area
- Consider reservation or partial reservation system



**Location: Public Stations**

**What we heard:**

- Least favorite place of students.
  - Too small – can't put a book down - The public stations are so small that you cannot use a book there
  - Too crowded – they are overpopulated - they are jammed together
  - Too busy
  - Too many people
  - Not available - huge lines – don't like waiting – not worth waiting in line
  - Too loud
- Early mornings are better.
  - I will use the individual work stations only in the morning when it is less crowded - can get at them after an early class but can't by mid-morning.
- There is a sense shorter term work is done at the public stations

**Advantages:**

- Color printing available

**Disadvantages:**

- Can't log on (disadvantage for students – not public users)

**Implications:**

- Redesign space
- Enlarge public station desktop space
- Provide more space between users
- Provide more computers

**Location: Tables**

**What we heard:**

- Tables are a favorite place to spread out and study.
- There are not enough electrical outlets near tables for plugging in laptops.
- Tables in the southwest corner and near writing center are especially popular. These areas are typically quieter than other parts of LC and many people self-regulate noise level. Table area under the stairs is too loud.
  - I don't like the quietness of the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. I like to have people around but in a quiet atmosphere. The LC is fine with me as long as I can get at an outlet in a reasonably quiet area.

**Disadvantages:**

- Can't plug into Ethernet connection at tables

**Implications:**

- Need more places to plug in



**Location: Lounge Chairs**

**What we heard:**

- The sun can be a factor for the chairs on the east side on the courtyard window.
- Move the north side courtyard window lounge chairs.
  - Too close to computers
  - Too loud in that area
  - Sun can be a negative factor
  - Many were unaware that chairs are there
- Put more lounge chairs in Procrastination Station for relaxing.
- The chairs are comfortable.
  - Love them, they are great, I like to kick my feet up on the tables
- I like the chairs between the stairs...like sitting in a group... like to be distracted ...like a lot of people around... like being distracted...like the commotion
- Lounge chair area between stairs seems dirty... littered... crowded...feet up...loud
- Need electrical and Ethernet connections near lounge chairs.
- Tall café style lounge chairs and tables received mixed reviews.

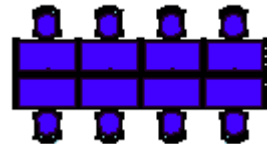


**Location:** Study Tables

**What we heard:**

- Good for working with 2 or more people
- Study tables are like a 2<sup>nd</sup> choice to the study rooms

**Location:** Individual stations on south side without computers



**What we heard:**

- I like working there because I can plug in.



**Developing new Learning Commons spaces:** Quiet Study

**What we heard:**

- There should be quiet areas with computers, pod style furniture, tables, power and Ethernet connectivity, and comfortable chairs.
  - Perhaps keep quiet computer area separate from quiet tables
  - Computers should be pod styled – enough room for a computer and to spread out
- The rug on 2<sup>nd</sup> floor is nice. It makes the room nicer and I am not afraid to scoot my chair out and have it screech like on 3. The 3<sup>rd</sup> floor is cold and ugly.
- Separate quiet areas are desirable even for people who prefer the more active atmosphere of the LC.
- If the 7<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> floor had extended hours they would offer more quiet computer access

**Developing new Learning Commons spaces:      The Courtyard**

**What we heard:**

- It will be nice and homey if there is bistro style seating (along with a chef and grill)
- Wooden benches – maybe like on entry level
- Patio set up with shade would be nice
- Food and/or restaurant options outside are desirable
- Picnic table style in order to bring food out from Procrastination Station
- Is it windy in the courtyard like on the entry level?
- Ethernet and electrical connections are desirable
- I would use the courtyard
- Benches might be good but would people just smoke and talk on phones?

**Developing new Learning Commons spaces :      Stand-up email stations**

**What we heard:**

- It would be nice but it is not necessarily a priority

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**Final Thoughts**

**What we heard:**

- More outlets
- More Ethernet plug-in locations
- More Pods - sometimes hard to find an open one
- Excited about courtyard development
- LC is overcrowded
- Quiet area with computers and isolated places
- More new tables like the red ones with outlets

- Would like an entrance on the Lower Level
- Like the semi-private space of the pods – comfortableness
- Make study rooms soundproof
- Reference staff is very helpful
- The Library is better, people hang out more, it's a homier place... the feeling has improved. There are more computers and space for groups
- I just want to be able to come to the library and get a computer... a guaranteed and reliable spot.
- I want my own spot where I can spread out
- I like that it is set up to encourage conversation and that is a good thing.
- Some people say they don't go to the Learning Commons because it is too loud. For me, the noise cuts the monotony.
- I like the current atmosphere a lot, I like the laid back feeling

Special thanks to Learning Commons staff Carol Will, Myles Sullivan, and Peter Tigner for assistance recruiting participants. Thank you to Assessment Committee members Mike Allard and Steve McGinty for taking notes during the sessions.