Student Commons

National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities

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Student commons are no longer simply congregation spaces for students with time on their hands. They are integral to providing a welcoming environment and effective learning space for students.

Many student commons have been transformed into spaces for socialization, an environment for alternative teaching methods, a forum for large group meetings and distance learning, and an area for consultation or individual and small-group work.

A large part of the integration of student commons into the middle and high schools, and even elementary schools, is in telecommunications, computer, and information retrieval technologies as well as the trend toward specifying room furnishings and fixtures that allow optimal flexibility. Innovations will also likely be migrating down from the university level, where student commons are melding with both libraries and student centers to provide attractive “information” and “learning” centers.

As an integral part of the student learning experience, student commons have the potential to serve as a hub where students can connect with the information they need to get their work done—individually and collaboratively—through their medium of choice: Internet connection. Given the proper direction and supervision, spaces often perceived as an inefficient use of valuable square footage have a renewed chance to make a good impression on both students and the communities that support them.

Educational Trends

The academic and social wellbeing of middle school students is enhanced when the learning environment provides spaces where they feel safe and valued and can learn in different ways and at different speeds (NMSA 1998). *Breaking Ranks,* a study by the Carnegie Foundation and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, recommends that "high schools create small units in which anonymity is banished" (Carnegie Foundation and NASSP 1995: 23).

The goal of personalizing learning environments at all levels of the educational system has generated immense interest in classroom clusters, house plans, and school-within-a-school settings. This, in turn, has magnified the role student commons can play in a school's overall design, serving as a hub for an academic wing or providing a space for alternative teaching strategies.

Likewise, including a student commons in an architectural plan is a signal that a school is designed with student needs and wants in mind. "Our school facilities," notes researcher Gary Moore, "are a tangible symbol of our commitment to education, and the message is not lost on students" (Moore 1995: 4; quoted in Duke 1998: 17). Research shows, for example, that a child's senses of identity and belonging are influenced positively by appropriately scaled and comfortable furnishings, lively colors, and a homey feel. Students have a much greater pride of place in such an environment and believe they are listened to and valued as individuals (David and Weinstein 1987: 7-9).

Student Commons as Social Spaces

The student commons that serves a social purpose may be thought of as the student "social center," similar to the role a lobby plays in a hotel. Student commons have traditionally served as social spaces in high school settings (McCurdy 1969: 215). Today, the idea of including a student commons as a social space is becoming a regular fixture throughout all grade levels.

The student commons usually serves the entire student body (during lunchtime and between classes, for example) or is used as a study hall. It may also be used for group/club meetings, include a reading area, or function as a snack bar/vending station. The student commons should be close to food services and restrooms and be easily supervised by school administrators and personnel. The student commons can also add multi-purpose flexibility to adjacent general-use areas. Placing the student commons next to

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the auditorium, cafeteria, or gymnasium, for instance, allows the space to be used as an overflow area during large school or community events.

To promote a social atmosphere, the design and furnishing of the student commons should be inviting and comfortable. The placement and size of couches, tables, and chairs should facilitate informal conversation, reading, and individual, one-on-one, or small group interaction. Consequently, when specifying and placing relatively immovable couches, tables, and wooden chairs (versus stackable chairs and furniture on castings, which are easily moved) thought needs to be given to how varied the use of the space will be throughout the day. If the layout of the room is dominated by its hard-to-move furnishings, the common space itself will determine how students use it rather than the students making those determinations themselves. Naturally, durability and ease of cleaning the furnishings are also selection considerations.

Combining indirect and task lighting provides proper light for general activities, use of computers, and reading books. Natural light promotes a sense of space and relaxation, and a raised ceiling heightens the sense of "place." Carpeting and acoustical ceilings dampen excessive noise. Further, the ventilation system needs to be sized appropriately to provide ample conditioned air without creating undue background noise.

In designing a student commons to serve as a social space, avoid an empty, antiseptic design. Large spaces ward off issues of traffic congestion, litter, and excessive wear and tear, but smaller, more intimate and interesting spaces make students feel comfortable and convey a sense of institutional concern for students' needs.

Student Commons as Instructional Space

Student commons that serve as instructional spaces have become prevalent in elementary and middle schools with classroom clusters. Such clustering—sometimes known as houses or pods—may be arranged by grade or department (such as math or science wings) or as a school-within-a-school setting. Incorporating commons areas into instructional space has been facilitated by the fact that classroom clusters are no more expensive to build than traditional layouts (*American School Board Journal* 1998: 8).

A student commons used for instructional purposes should be bordered by classrooms and have direct access to the outdoors to allow for emergency egress, provide access to the outdoor environment for educational purposes, and facilitate circulation patterns. If access is allowed into the commons area from the outdoors, an outdoor canopy and entryway drainage grille or other means of keeping mud and water outside will also be necessary.

Spaces connected to the student commons may include an instruction space for small groups, restrooms, storage, and teacher workspace. Student commons can be used as a meeting space for small groups, a meeting/lecture hall for all the students in the cluster, an area for individual work, and a breakout space for one-on-one consultations.

The commons space should be able to hold all of the students in the cluster. Allow 1,500 to 2,000 square feet for a cluster of 100 students. In designing the student commons as an instructional space, consider providing:

- Numerous modular tables and chairs that can easily be moved and assembled
- Electrical and data-drop outlets for computers and audiovisual equipment (raised-floor systems offer the greatest flexibility for arranging this equipment as needs dictate)
- A combination of indirect and task lighting that will allow for reading and computer use (this is particularly relevant at the high school level).

Carpeting, greenery (with appropriate lighting), water fountains, and natural light can personalize the student commons, making it student-friendly. Remember, however, that the student commons is an alternative instructional area. The space should accommodate multiple computers with modems, a rear or front projection system, a sound system, and variable lighting controls. Finally, it may be appropriate to design a three-sided, two- or three-tiered, raised amphitheater-style area. A student commons with such an amphitheater could be used for viewing videos and holding lectures for the entire student cluster, for large group discussions and orientations, and for individual reading and small-group meetings.

Learning Commons

A trend in recent years that has followed the fast-growing use of laptop and handheld computer/telecommunications devices is the merging of the

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functions once provided by libraries (providing ready access to information) with the dynamics of group workspaces. The additional role this approach gives to the student commons, if adopted, is to serve as a campus hub that can provide access both to Internet-based information and computer applications specific to academic subjects (e.g., software for multimedia production, advanced mathematics, music, or foreign language applications). This trend is particularly evident in post-secondary educational facilities (Lippincot 2006)

There is no single vision of what makes up a learning commons, although there are overarching goals: flexibility of use and flexibility over time to adapt to technological advancements. Some students might need individual workstations within a designated quiet zone. There are also a variety of physical arrangements that can accommodate collaborative workgroups of more than one (Leiboff 2010):

- An open-plan of three- to four-person tables, each supporting one computer
- A five- to six-person meeting room with a table, computer, and wall-mounted screen
- An open-plan arrangement of movable chairs and tables with multiple outlets
- Fixed diner-style banquets around a table with built-in connections to support one or more computers

Flexibility within the room is made simpler with the help of the wide variety of movable furnishings currently on the market, including tables and seats, desks that convert to computer workstations, and shelving. The ability to configure a room quickly for the need at hand means one room can accommodate many uses, and the overall space required for the learning commons is reduced. A wireless Internet connection within the room, where possible, would also maximize flexibility (Kollie 2008).

Depending on the school's curriculum plan for student use of the commons and its mesh with other faculty within the school, support staff may be necessary, which might comprise school librarians or others who can provide students with guidance on using the learning commons' equipment and software applications. Student volunteers are another possible source of expertise, which would allow for peer-to-peer transfer of knowledge on using the learning commons (Leiboff 2010).

Principles for Designing Student Commons

Student commons, be they social or instructional spaces, have numerous features in common. Their design should:

- **Convey a sense of place and belonging for students.** Students can feel a sense of ownership by being involved in the planning and design of the student commons or by personalizing the space. Because students will be the primary users and beneficiaries of the commons, their input can provide a unique and important perspective (Sanoff 1996: 21-22). The student commons can be personalized by featuring group color codes or school colors, displaying student artwork, and providing colorful wall decorations or thematic bulletin boards. Architectural motifs—such as skylights, raised ceilings, or distinctive patterns—also enhance student ownership.
- **Balance the pragmatic maintenance/ organizational concerns of the administration with the psychosocial needs of students.** The design of a space is all too often focused on avoiding negative events—for example, preventing injuries or traffic bottlenecks. The design challenge can be reframed, however: How can the furnishings in the student commons be both comfortable and durable? How can the student commons promote impromptu groupings and discussions and yet facilitate smooth traffic flow? How can the student commons provide private space and be easily supervised? Resolving these tensions is key to designing a functional and inviting student commons.
- **Make the student commons a true learning environment.** For an instructional space, lighting, acoustics, and technology should support individual, small-group, and large-group work. For a social center, the space should suggest a comfortable, inviting atmosphere and provide areas for intimate and informal discussion.

Student commons can function both as formal and informal learning environments. They provide a space for instruction and individual work and serve as places for intimate and social gatherings. Far from inefficient, student commons are central to clustered classroom designs. Providing a relaxed space that supports instruction is a prominent way to facilitate learning and enhance students' appreciation of their physical environment.

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Additional Information

See the NCEF resource list, *Student Commons and Student Centers*, online at http://www.ncef.org/rl/student_commons.cfm

Publication Notes

Student Commons was updated in October 2010 based on the July 2000 report of the same title by Dan Butin of the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design at the University of Virginia.

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