

# Building a Teaching and Learning Community

*How the U. of Calgary leapt into the future with two innovative facilities*

by **James Frideres** and **Gregory Harris**

Shrinking budgets, increasing enrollments, and ever-escalating complexity in information technology make it more difficult for university administrators to fulfill the fundamental mandate to enhance the learning environment for students. At the University of Calgary two new technology initiatives are building, bridging, and enriching communities of teachers and learners.

The Information Commons, open 24 hours a day, is a multimedia research facility based in the main campus library that helps learners develop the information literacy skills they need to navigate the oceans of available data. Another information technology center on campus, The Learning Commons, fosters innovation and collaboration in teaching. Together the two projects create communities of learners that share a spirit of discovery and inquiry as they explore the learning process.

## The Vision

The roots of the Learning and Information Commons projects can be traced to the university's strategic planning process in the mid to late 1990s. Guided by a vision that University of Calgary graduates should be distinguished by excellence in core competencies—such as

numeracy, computer literacy, and critical thinking—the university extensively redesigned its curriculum to ensure seven distinct features are integrated into all programs. Each program will maintain a clearly identifiable field of study presented through an explicit syllabus, an international component, interdisciplinary perspective, experien-

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tial learning, extended faculty-student interaction, and a clear integration of research into course content.

As a result, administrators realized the university needed an information technology resource unit to ensure competence in technology-enabled teaching, research, and administration and to provide a home for the curriculum redesign initiative.

Guided by the belief that technology

should be about people, not equipment, administrators developed a vision for the new unit. The Learning Commons is an extensive, collegial community of faculty, students, staff, and external partners committed to enhancing student learning and to creating new knowledge about teaching and learning through collaboration.

## The Learning Commons

Development of The Learning Commons proceeded rapidly from mid-1998 to its official opening that September. Private-sector support from Shaw Cable, the Royal Bank of Canada, Smed International, and Pepsi Cola was instrumental in funding construction and certain operation costs. The project also was funded by provincial government agencies such as the Alberta Science and Research Authority, the Intellectual Infrastructure Partnership Program, and the Multimedia Advanced Computing Infrastructure Program.

Centrally located on campus, The Learning Commons provides a creative common ground where faculty, staff, and students can meet to explore new ideas, initiatives, and research related to teaching and learning.

The newly developed space includes several video- and audio-editing suites;



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The Learning Commons helpdesk staff field questions about the facility's audio, visual, and multimedia equipment from faculty, staff, and students.

a multimedia development lab for faculty, staff, and senior students; a "Cyberport," which is a large classroom for live video and sound presentations; open modular workspaces; open meeting and sitting spaces; and a cappuccino bar.

One of the first actions the new board of directors of The Learning Commons took was to embark on a project called "Building the Community." This project's goal is to foster discussion about the needs and priorities of the departments, faculties, and the whole university. The chair of the board and members visited with faculty deans and department representatives during the year to solicit their views on the role of The Learning Commons.

Today there are three separate but fully integrated units in The Learning Commons; they have a lengthy history on campus but previously operated in isolation from one another. Their integration came about after it became

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clear that the previous structure (silos) did not permit them to participate in effective project management.

- **The Distance Learning Centre.** This facility includes two large classrooms equipped for both full-motion and compressed-video conferencing, two smaller classrooms equipped for compressed-video conferencing, and three audio-conferencing studios. As the university provides more off-campus courses, the Distance Learning Centre fills a critical role in expanding delivery.

- **The Advanced Media for Learning Unit.** Production staff in The Advanced Media for Learning Unit help faculty develop new media for teaching and learning, whether it's instructional software or electronic course material delivery.
- **The Learning Enhancement and Professional Development Office.** The LEPDO helps University of Calgary members improve their professional skills as teachers and learners through:
  - Faculty development workshops and services throughout the academic year
  - Training and consultation in electronic curriculum, including multimedia development, distance- and distributed-learning applications
  - Individual teaching development services, including peer mentoring, videotaping and feedback on classes, and "English as Second Spoken Language" seminars for instructors
  - A Resource Centre with an extensive selection of books, periodicals, and multimedia resources related to teaching and learning development

The Learning Commons' three units act as an integrated whole. Their symbiotic relationship has proved beneficial to faculty members who wish to add technology to their traditional classroom activities or want to develop distance-delivery courses. At present, the University of Calgary offers fewer than 100 courses online, but nearly 300 traditional classroom courses now incorporate substantial technology.

The Learning Commons also provides fellowships to enable faculty, students, and staff to conduct research and partake in faculty development activities that support The Learning



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More than 250 computer workstations in the University of Calgary's main library are part of The Information Commons, which also features collaborative workrooms, laptop stations, and an information literacy classroom.

250 computers were added to the library along with five laser printers. About 150 machines are full-featured workstations that provide access to the Internet, e-mail, and online library catalogues as well as spreadsheet, word processor, and presentation software. There are more than 50 computers in a classroom used for information literacy training and another 20 providing access to specialized information resources. Users can plug in their own laptops at one of 21 "touchdown stations" or use the Ethernet connections available in any of the 10 collaborative workrooms, each large enough for eight people.

The Information Commons represents more than a simple addition of technology. On-site classroom instruc-

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Commons' objectives. They fall into the following areas:

- Professional development activities related to the theory and practice of teaching, learning, and faculty development
- Efforts to enhance the student learning environment
- Activities that enhance the teaching and learning environment with information technologies
- Evaluations of educational content delivery to homes and business
- Activities that focus on new partnerships
- Collaborations with the private sec-

tor to encourage workplace learning

- New forms of course and program delivery for post-degree continuous learning

### The Information Commons

One of the largest facilities of its kind in North America, The Information Commons expanded and integrated information resources technology in the university library, directly supporting and enhancing the research needs of some 28,000 full-time undergraduate and graduate students of the University of Calgary.

To implement the program, about

tion, technical and reference desk assistance, and one-on-one interaction with staff make for a unique integration of new technology and existing library services and resources. The total package gives students the information literacy skills so necessary for navigating the universe of information now available.

The government of Alberta provided most of the funding for this project, about half of which was spent on technology; the rest paid for infrastructure improvements. The Royal Bank of Canada also provided financial support.

## Outcomes and Lessons Learned

Creating technological units that foster new technology use in the classroom has required extensive funding as well as building an organizational structure that meets the needs of faculty and students. Extensive consultation must take place with deans and department heads. Moreover, leaders in the academic community must support the initiative and the administration heading it must have academic credibility with the rest of the community. Student leaders have been part of the organizational structure since the inception and have benefited both directly (fellowships, research assistants, lab associates) and indirectly (benefits emerge in classroom activities).

Integrating these three units has introduced a project management approach to The Learning Commons and demonstrated how necessary it is to have an integrated plan. All projects undertaken by The Learning Commons have input from managers involved in learning enhancement, multimedia, technology, and professional development.

The Learning Commons had early growing pains that stemmed from too large a board of directors, separate budgets for the three subunits, and not enough qualified technicians to support the technology. After a two-year trial period The Learning Commons was reorganized. In the process the positions of academic director and associate director were created. All projects are subject to project management, a process that investigates several knowledge areas including scope, time, cost, quality, resource allocation, communication, and risk. Project management also addresses such issues as intellectual property

rights, revenue sharing, team responsibility, and agreement on “deliverables” and completion dates. One-year funding is about to be supplemented by ongoing base-budget funding. The Learning Commons is now fully integrated—including budgets—and the appropriate technological support is in place.

The Learning Commons is entering its next phase of “Building the Community,” which will provide both a literal and metaphorical meeting place for faculty and students. The intent of this phase is to get

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professors to think of new ways to enhance the learning environment on campus. During this phase professors will also share strategies and techniques they use both in and outside the classroom. The end result will be an “ethos” that reinforces good teaching as well as a formal and informal support network on campus that will enhance teaching and learning activities. Thus, while there will be a formal structure on campus that has a complex array of equipment to support innovative teaching and learning environments, a parallel system of

social and intellectual support will be available to faculty.

Ultimately the creation of two separate facilities has posed logistical problems as well as jurisdictional ones. For example, where should the “teaching” materials be housed and who should administer them? It has been agreed that The Information Commons will administer and catalogue the materials, but they will be housed in The Learning Commons. Communication links between the two facilities have been opened but remain in a state of tension as the two facilities negotiate rights and responsibilities. The Information Commons has provided space for the director of the teaching, learning, and curriculum projects as well as meeting space for faculty who wish to discuss issues related to teaching and learning. The exchange of data between the two facilities is no longer a problem as major transmission corridors have been established. The directors of both units (and their staff) now meet on a regular basis and both are members of major university committees, all of which ensure a coordinated approach to learning and teaching activities on campus.

It has taken some time, but both faculty and students have embraced the two projects—The Learning Commons helps create better teachers, and The Information Commons centralizes new technology in the main library. Together the two initiatives have provided a creative solution for enhancing the learning environment and have helped transform education through technology. *✍*

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