The Learning Commons in Historical Context

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Abstract

The college and university library has become the focal point of the "Information Commons" on physical, virtual, and cultural levels. During the technology revolution of the 1980's and 1990's the Information Commons (IC) became established as a new model for service delivery in libraries. This model goes beyond the access and retrieval function of traditional reference service to support the full range of activities of information literacy, helping students access, manage, integrate, evaluate and create information and knowledge. Since 2000, many Information Commons facilities have been established in collaboration with other learning support units such as tutorial programs, writing centers, and faculty development centers. These expanded IC facilities are now often called Learning Commons. A case study of the author's consulting project at Salve Regina University in Newport, Rhode Island (USA) offers one example of how the floorspace of a traditional university library is being reconfigured to create a Learning Commons.

Keywords: Information Commons, Learning Commons, learning centers, library reconfiguration, information literacy

The term "Information Commons" has been invoked since the mid-1980's to describe the potential aggregation of information and sharing of knowledge across physical, technological, and cultural boundaries. In the writings of Harlan Cleveland (founder of the University of Minnesota's Institute for Public Policy) and Robert W. Lucky, (Executive Director of Research at Bell Laboratories), the term came to represent a global internetworking of computers to communicate academic knowledge, leading-edge research, and professional expertise.[Cleveland 1985, 1990; Lucky 1991] And, as libraries began to offer Web portals to aggregated databases and other consolidated digital resources in the 1990's, the predictions of Cleveland, Lucky, and others took tangible shape as students and faculty began to explore this development of the "virtual commons."

But other authors such as David Bollier had looked beyond this internetworked environment of the "virtual commons," and used Information Commons even more broadly to encompass the cultural envelope of laws, regulations, and popular traditions that enabled freedom of expression and the social sharing of knowledge for the common good. This level of "information commons" was contrasted with countervailing trends of commercialization, commodification of information, and governmental restrictions on the open transfer of knowledge, sometimes rooted in national security and political ideology. [Bollier 2002] Libraries, in their pre-internet traditional role as storehouses of the printed records of humanity, were viewed as both cornerstones and

public access points for this "cultural commons."

By the early 1990's, however, the development of the Internet and World Wide Web (WWW) coincided with a measurable decline in usage of traditional library services and print collections, especially among academic libraries across North America. The decline included door count and print book circulation, but the service that seemed most impacted was reference. As the Executive Summary of ARL SPEC Kit 268 *Reference Service Statistics & Assessment* put it: "...in recent years...many academic libraries have experienced a sharp reduction in the number of transactions recorded," and more specifically, "...77% of responding libraries reported that the number of reference transactions has decreased in the past three years." [Novotny 2002]. While it has never been definitively proven that the decline in traditional academic library usage between 1993 and 2003 was caused by increased use of online search engines like Google, the correlation was probably not coincidental. Such indicators of slackening library demand were accompanied by a lengthy series of journal articles questioning the future of printed books and journals, academic publishing houses, and the underlying traditions of print scholarship and bibliography.

Some libraries responded to the rise of the WWW by installing student-access computer labs in or near their reference departments to provide access to the aggregated databases available in the virtual commons. Many also created and expanded Media Services units to facilitate use of new media formats and technologies. And increasing use of research databases caused libraries to create specialized offices to assist with the manipulation and processing of numerical, geographical, and scientific datasets. At institutions like University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the result was that users enjoyed a new array of services that went beyond the access and retrieval model of traditional reference, to include subsequent steps in the processing and interpretation of information, and culminating in the production and presentation of new knowledge. But to make use of this broadened array of services, students still normally had to leave their original computer labs to navigate a network of referrals to and among discreet academic support units named Reference, Media Services, and Research Data Services.

It soon became clear that such divisions of service delivery did not always make for efficient use of staff expertise and technology resources. For many students and faculty members, it became apparent that the broadened range of information searching, data manipulation, knowledge production, and media presentation activities could potentially be carried out on a single well-equipped workstation. Librarians began to realize that they could assemble arrays of such multifunctional workstations in a physical "commons," adjacent to a single service desk (or cluster of desks) where reference librarians could work alongside (and in collaboration with) media specialists, data manipulation experts, and IT support staff. By 1995, a handful of universities, colleges, and community colleges, including the University of Iowa and the University of Southern California, had created such spaces, and their pioneering efforts led numerous other college and university libraries to seriously consider this new physical model known as the "Information Commons (IC)."

Identification, access, and retrieval of information (traditional reference service)
Processing, manipulation, and interpretation of knowledge
Production, presentation, and publication of new knowledge

Figure One: Continuum of Service in the physical commons

These new facilities seemed to reinvigorate and revitalize academic library environments. Numerous college and university libraries with newly established IC's reported striking increases in student usage, as documented in *The Information Commons Handbook*, and elsewhere.[Beagle 2006] Thus, by the start of the 21ˢᵗ century, libraries had become the intersection point of the Information Commons concept on three interrelated and interdependent levels: physical, virtual, and cultural, as shown in Figure Two.
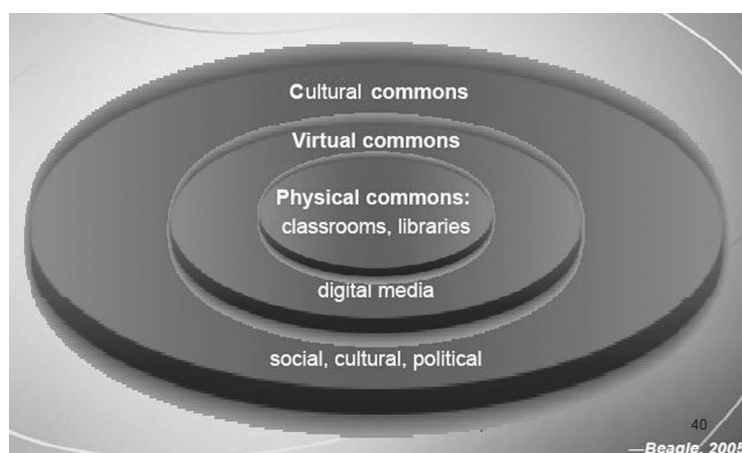
Figure Two: the context of physical, virtual, and cultural commons

During this same period, librarians and educators were proposing that students should be exposed to a more inclusive model of "information literacy" that extended beyond access and retrieval to a more comprehensive range of activities underlying the management, integration and evaluation of information, culminating in the process of creating new information and knowledge. This range included both skill-based technical activities such as format conversion, as well as high-order cognitive competencies such as critical evaluation, that were seen as undergirding the full potential range of student learning. These components of information literacy were formalized and summarized by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) as shown in Figure Three:

Access - knowing about and knowing how to collect and/or retrieve information.
Manage - applying an existing organizational or classification scheme.
Integrate - interpreting and representing information, which involves summarizing, comparing and contrasting.
Evaluate - making judgments about the quality, relevance, usefulness or efficiency of information.
Create - generating information by adapting, applying, designing, inventing or authoring information.

Figure Three: ETS Components of Information Literacy

By the time I became Head of the Information Commons at UNC-Charlotte in 1997, it had become clear to me and a number of other library managers that the physical Information Commons facilities were offering a continuum of service that dynamically paralleled the ETS components of information literacy. Thus, library instructional programs designed to facilitate student learning based on information literacy frameworks should find their most effective implementation in an Information Commons environment, rather than within the environment of traditional libraries. On a number of campuses, new IC facilities were designed with information literacy instructional possibilities and group learning activities very much in mind. This, in turn, broadened the scope of the physical commons to include a new focus on student <u>learning</u>, rather than only the manipulation of information.

Information Commons array of services	Information Literacy components
Identification *& retrieval*	<u>Access</u>: knowing about and knowing how to collect and/or retrieve information
Processing *& interpretation*	<u>Manage</u>: applying an existing organizational or classification scheme. <u>Integrate</u>: interpreting and representing, comparing and contrasting. <u>Evaluate</u>: judgments about the quality, relevance, usefulness, of information

Packaging & presentation	Create: generating information by adapting, applying, designing, inventing or authoring

Figure Four: How the Information Commons parallels Information Literacy

In a growing number of libraries, the IC model was similarly being extended beyond the information literacy rubric to include collaboration with, or even co-location with, other campus units supporting learning, such as tutorial programs, writing centers, and faculty development centers. These newly expanded facilities warranted a new designation, and so the term "Learning Commons" (LC) offered a name to distinguish this more comprehensive model from the Information Commons. On some campuses, libraries first successfully implemented IC's, and subsequently expanded their services and facilities to host collaborative programs of learning support, renaming them LC's. Jana Futch Martin, University Librarian, Reference & Instruction, described how the University of South Florida (Tampa) came to change the name of its Information Commons to Learning Commons: "We changed our name to Learning Commons after adding services adjacent to ours, such as the Writing Center and Tutoring and Learning Services. This collaboration -- to have disparate student learning services from all over campus share one common area here in the Library -- has been a great success so far." [Martin 2008] Thus, the Learning Commons model not only has revitalized and reinvigorated the academic library, but in effect *repositioned* it to become a more active agent of collaboration in support of learning outcomes. And while the focus of this article as been on academic libraries in the United States, the IC / LC movement has been characterized from the beginning by its international reach, with many examples under development in British, Canadian, German, and Australian universities. [Beatty 2008; Degkwitz 2006; Gläser 2008; Mountifield 2008.]

To view the Learning Commons in the historical context of academic change initiatives, we can use a matrix developed in the 1990's by the American Council of Education (ACE). Researchers with A.C.E. had studied a range of academic change initiatives at colleges and universities, and from their findings produced a primer for change that includes a typology, or matrix, of change initiatives. This matrix plots graph lines representing the depth of change, in terms of fundamental impact on basic activities and assumptions, and pervasiveness of change, in terms of extent and distribution of its influence beyond the library's walls. This matrix, adapted in Figure Five, may be helpful in characterizing the idea of a phased evolution from Information Commons to Learning Commons, and can serve to summarize the diverse arena of collaborative learning initiatives now evident.

Adjustment	*depth*	Far-reaching change
pervasiveness →	↓	*pervasiveness* →
Isolated change	*depth*	Transformation

Figure Five: Matrix of change initiatives (from A.C.E.)

1) Adjustment; neither deep, in terms of the library's core operations, nor pervasive, in terms of impact across campus. Described as a computer lab on the first floor of the library with a suite of productivity software (MSOffice) combined with access to electronic resources. Focus broadens from print to integration and coordination of information and technology resources for students.

2) Isolated change; deep, in that the IC has substantially impacted library operations and services, but not pervasive, without broad impact across campus. Described as the same lab as (1) but with media authoring tools also included, and with coordinated in-library staff support designed to carry the user through a continuum of service from resource identification and retrieval on through data processing and format conversion to the desired end state of presentation, packaging, or publication. Here, the library has altered its pattern of service delivery to better align

itself with changing campus-wide priorities, and has done so by integrating functions formerly carried out by separate units within the library to project a new unified and comprehensive service profile. However, this level portrays an IC model that is still library-centric. While it better *aligns* the library with other campus priorities, it is still not intrinsically collaborative with other campus initiatives.

------ This marks the proposed threshold between IC and LC-----

3) <u>Far-reaching change</u>; The library commons exerts a significant presence across campus, but that influence remains primarily associative, rather than truly collaborative. Described as (2) plus coordination with other unit(s) such as a faculty development center or center for teaching and learning, as well as the frequent inclusion of a campus-wide course management system meaningfully linked to and integrated with library electronic resources and virtual reference services. Here, the library has further altered its pattern of service delivery to better align itself with changing campus-wide priorities, and has done so by integrating those functions formerly carried out *within* the library with others formerly carried out *beyond* the library's purview. The service profile is no longer library centric.

4) <u>Transformation</u>. both deep, in its impact on library services, and pervasive in terms of important campus-wide collaborations. Described as (3) but carried out with reference to (or within a framework of) campus-wide schema and/or faculty innovation such as core curriculum revision, information literacy across the curriculum, writing/authoring across the curriculum, cognitive immersion learning paradigms such as the "classroom flip," and/or learning object/IMS implementation, such as D-Space. At this level, we continue to see functional integration across a horizontal plane, but we begin to see vertical differentiation as the former service delivery profile projected toward students becomes enhanced with another (or multiple) service delivery profile(s) projected at the needs of faculty as course authors, knowledge creators, learning coaches, and scholarly communicators. This also involves an enriched suite of toolsets and services.

Case Study: McKillop Library at Salve Regina University

Because the Information Commons and Learning Commons facilities have developed within existing libraries as a variable pattern of adaptive change, many libraries are only now adapting their library structures and resources to incorporate such facilities. One such example is Salve Regina University (SRU) in Newport, Rhode Island. What follows is a discussion of the author's recent consultation and development of a planning proposal for a Learning Commons at SRU's McKillop Library.

The McKillop Library is an extremely attractive building located near the center of the campus, with a north wing and an east wing creating an "L" shaped interior on all four floors. McKillop Library exhibits a space utilization pattern fairly typical of academic libraries circa 1980's and early 1990's. The first floor, which serves as the main entry level for most students and faculty, houses reference services in the north wing and a classroom for information literacy instruction. A current periodicals reading area is housed in the east wing, along with a circulating media collection (DVD's).

The Ground Floor, below the main entry level, came to accommodate an assortment of service areas: Academic Computer Labs, Copy Center, Design Services, Laptop Service Center, Mail Services, and most recently, the Instructional Technology Coordinator's office with associated faculty lab and technology demonstration classroom. These offices came to be located in the library by way of a general understanding that they in some way were related to library resources and services, but were left as discreet offices on the ground floor and thus never became inherently collaborative with library services on upper floors.

Broad regions of the upper floors are devoted to open-aisle shelving for print books and bound periodicals. Scattered among and around the open stacks are small reading and study areas. But here also, a couple of specialized learning support areas were located in relative isolation among the bookstacks. The Second Floor, for example, holds a Curriculum Center, while the Third Floor houses an Academic Development Center (ADC), providing tutorial services to promote learning skills and writing remediation. It has little functional relation to the other library service on that floor: Archives and special collections. Overall, the arrangement permitted little of the natural synergies that could develop between related units. Some users of the Curriculum Center could make use of the instructional technology classroom, but this was located two floors below. And some of the tutorial services of ADC involved information seeking skills similar to reference, but again, these two service areas were two floors removed from one another.

In an ideal world, if McKillop Library were being designed from the ground-up in 2008 the multi-floor two-wing configuration would argue for maximal use of the Ground Floor to house 1) compact shelving to hold bound periodicals and a sizeable chunk of the print book collection, 2) archives and preservation, and potentially 3) library technical services. This would permit greater efficiency in collection housing, as open-aisle shelving consumes 30%-50% more floorspace for a print collection of equivalent size. Ground Floor compact stacks would thus open upper floors for increasingly integrated and collaborative services characteristic of Learning Commons.

During my visits to SRU, I observed that the academic computer labs on the Ground Floor seemed very underutilized. This was not a surprise, as a number of studies in the library literature have predicted and tracked decreasing usage levels of "generic" computer labs in academic libraries (see, for example, *The Information Commons Handbook*, p. 6.). In fact, such changing usage patterns helped spark the entire Information Commons and Learning Commons movement. Therefore, increased workstation arrays in the projected upper floor Learning Commons could further erode student usage of ground floor labs, leaving these rooms optimal candidates for re-purposing. Therefore, my report recommended that the Archives collection be moved from the Third Floor to one ground floor lab area, with the archivist's office and associated reading area moved to the other lab.

By contrast, the Instructional Technology Coordinator's space on the Ground Floor seemed to be very well-utilized in and of itself. The potential issue here lies not in how the current space is utilized, but in its relative isolation on the Ground Floor from potentially expanded and integrated Learning Commons and faculty development areas on upper floors, specifically the Second Floor. In my first consulting visit, the focus group brainstormed potential placement of instructional technology experimental classroom, and reached an initial consensus that a Second Floor placement would be preferable, where in collaboration with the existing Curriculum Center, it could form the nucleus of a faculty Learning Commons center for teaching and learning.

In consultation with the Director of McKillop Library, this author proposed the formation of a Learning Commons on the First and Second Floors, involving several key relocations. The ADC would move from the Third Floor to the First Floor, where its staff could share a collaborative service desk and workstation arrays in the east wing, while an expanded Media Services, a News Center, and a coffeeshop would occupy the north wing. Figure Six below shows the existing layout of the First Floor.

In Figure Seven below, Reference has been moved from the north wing to the east wing, where it can share service desk, collaborative workspaces, and workstations with the Academic Development Center relocated from the Third Floor. Figure Seven also shows the conjoined areas of Media Services, Coffeeshop, and News Center in the north wing. Altogether, these new and relocated service areas form the first floor Learning Commons.

In addition to these changes, the Instructional Technology Coordinator's lab and classroom would move from the
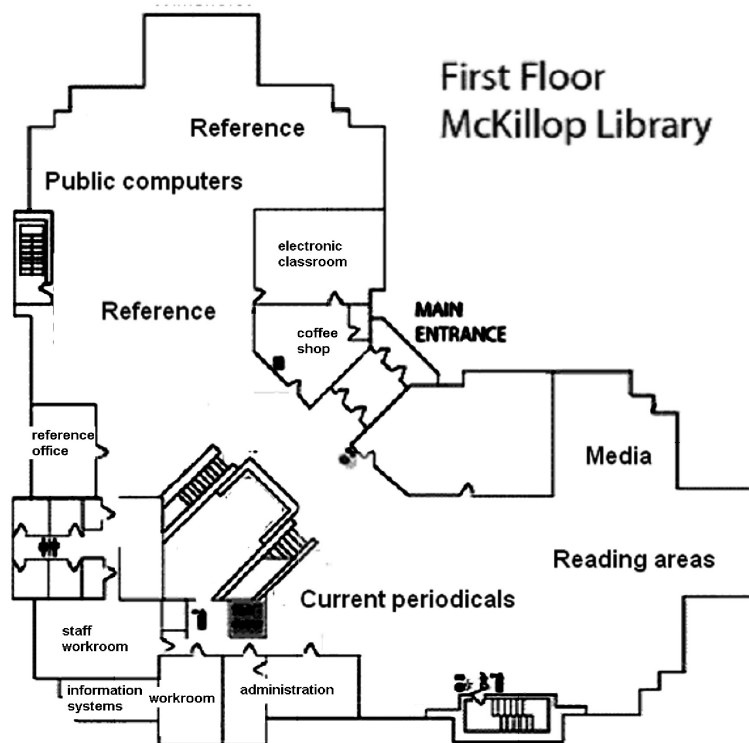
Figure Six: Existing layout of First Floor of McKillop Library
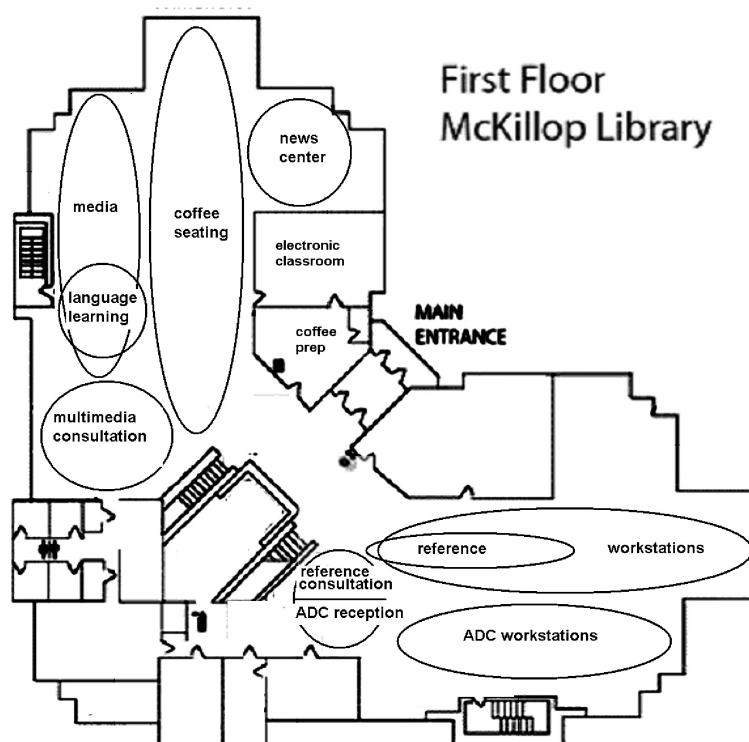

Figure Seven: Proposed First Floor Learning Commons for McKillop Library
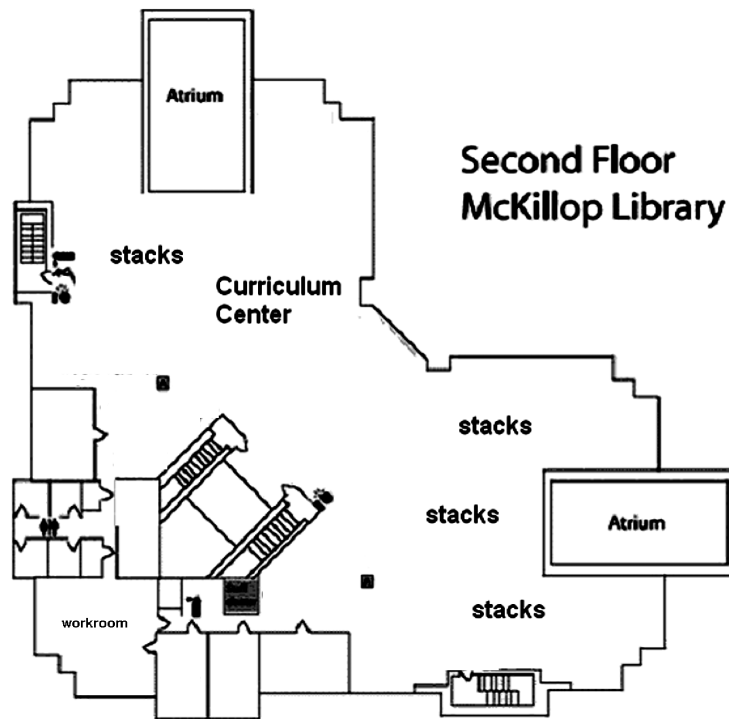
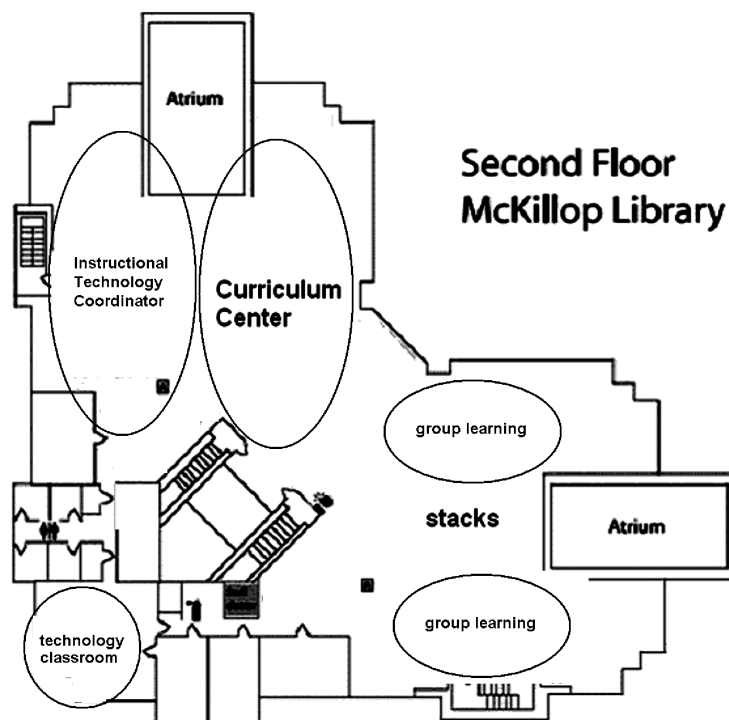Figure Eight: Existing layout of Second Floor of McKillop Library

Figure Nine: Proposed Second Floor Learning Commons for McKillop Library

Ground Floor to the Second Floor, where it could become collaborative with the Curriculum Center. Figure Eight summarizes the existing building configuration of the Second Floor.

In Figure Nine below, the Instructional Technology Coordinator's workspace has been relocated from the ground Floor to a space adjacent to the Curriculum Center, permitting collaboration and interaction. The ITC technology classroom has also been moved to a former technical services workroom to become the experimental classroom for the Second Floor Learning Commons.

While this case study necessarily simplifies the range of challenges and opportunities presented by the McKillop Library consulting project, it does serve as an example of how various services and resources that came to be located in the traditional library in a rather arbitrary and uncoordinated way can be relocated to create physical adjacencies that can enable the continuum of service of an Information Commons and the further collaboration among, and co-location of, learning support functions of a Learning Commons. All of these relocations are summarized below in Figure Ten.

Current service layout by floor	Proposed service layout by floor
Ground Floor Computer labs & Instructional Technology Support	*Ground Floor* Archives
First Floor Reference, current periodicals; circulating media collections; administrative offices	*First Floor* Reference & workstation arrays; Academic Development Center, News Center, coffeeshop, and larger Media Center in collaboration for Learning Commons
Second Floor Curriculum Center; Stacks & reading areas	*Second Floor* Curriculum Center; Instructional Technology Support, with tech. clasroom & group learning rooms collaboration for Learning Commons
Third Floor Archives; Academic Development Center	*Third Floor* Administrative offices; stacks; quiet study

Figure Ten: Existing arrangement for McKillop Library & proposed LC layout

Through the development of a Learning Commons, with careful and imaginative reconfiguration of service areas and collections, McKillop Library can be renewed to serve Salve Regina University vibrantly and effectively in the 21st Century. The Library's Learning Commons will become an adaptable facility that integrates, balances, and effectively adjusts to all the elements of a modern and dynamic scholarly knowledge system. The renewed Library Learning Commons will be a gateway to the full spectrum of information services, both print and electronic; a showplace for faculty innovation and for new information technology; a place on the campus for reflection and communication, and an inviting and inspiring space for reading, research, and learning.

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